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He raised the flask to his lips
and gulped down the Bile.

It was like drinking death
itself. But within that
blackness, he felt something
vast and strong and dark.



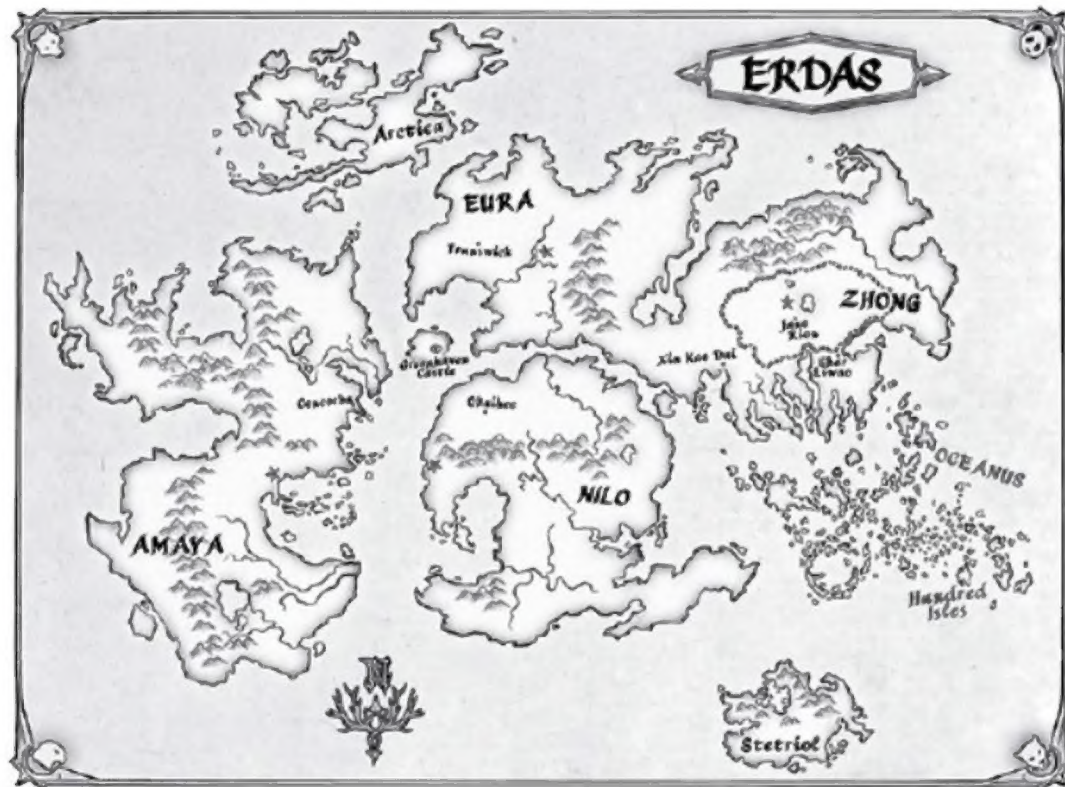
ASPIRIT ANIMALS™

HUNTED

Maggie Stiefvater



SCHOLASTIC INC.



For Victoria and William
— *M.S.*



CONTENTS

Wolf Emblem

Greencloak Letter

Title Page

Map of Erdas

Dedication

1

BILE

2

GREENHAVEN

3

LETTER

4

MOON TOWER

5

JOURNEY

6

HAWKERS

7

TRUNSWICK

8

THE HOWLING HOUSE

9

ESCAPE

10

GLENGAVIN

11

WINDOW

12

VOICES

13

LORD MACDONNELL

14

HUNTING

15

THE HARE

16

RUMFUSS

17

BATTLE

18

BLACK WILDCAT

19

IRON BOAR

20

CONSEQUENCES

Online Game Code

Sneak Peek

Spirit Animals Game

Copyright

BILE

THE FOREST WAS DARK AND FULL OF ANIMALS. THE NIGHT between the trees clicked and growled and fluttered.

In the small light of a lantern, a man and a boy stood and stared at a tiny flask. Although the flask itself was unimpressive, the solution inside was remarkable: a powerful substance that could force a bond between a human and a spirit animal.

“Will it hurt?” the boy, Devin Trunswick, asked. He was handsomely dressed, and there was an arrogant, cruel tilt to his chin that fear couldn’t erase. A lord’s son, he would never admit he was afraid of the dark. Even if there was plenty to be afraid of.

The man, Zerif, pulled back the embroidered blue hood of his cape so the boy could see his eyes more clearly. Holding up the flask, he said, “Does it matter? *This* is a privilege, little lordling. You’ll be a legend.”

Devin liked the sound of that. Right now, he was the opposite of a legend. He came from a long line of Marked individuals — people who had bonded with spirit animals. But when his turn had come, he had failed, breaking a chain that was generations long. At his Nectar Ceremony, the event where children who came of age drank from the Greencloaks' Nectar of Ninani and hoped for the appearance of a spirit animal, he had summoned nothing.

As if that wasn't bad enough, his own servant, a lowly shepherd boy, had called up a wolf. A *wolf*. And not just any wolf. The boy had summoned Briggan the Wolf, one of the Great Beasts.

Devin was stung by humiliation.

But that humiliation was going to end. Now an even more powerful animal would be delivered to him. He had prepared his whole life for this — it ran in his *blood*. This destiny had only been delayed, not destroyed.

"Why is it called Bile?" Devin asked, his eyes on the flask. "That doesn't sound great."

"It's a joke," Zerif replied tersely.

"I don't see what's funny about it."

"You've tasted the Nectar, right?"

Devin nodded, his face sour despite memories of its exquisite taste.

"Well," Zerif said, nose scrunching, "you're about to taste the Bile. Then you'll get the joke. I promise."

The boy looked hurriedly over his shoulder as a growl muttered from the trees. Beside him, a spider with a hard,

shiny back lowered itself down on a thread. He tried to stay out of its path.

“Whatever animal I call will have to listen to me, right?” he asked. “It will do whatever I say?”

“Bonds with the Bile are different from bonds with the Nectar,” Zerif informed him. “The Nectar might taste sweeter, but the Bile is more useful. We can control much more of the process. For instance, you don’t have to worry about bonding with that spider you’ve been so desperate to avoid.”

Devin bristled, annoyed that Zerif had noticed his terror. Loftily, he said, “I’m not worried.”

But his eyes darted to the covered cage that waited for them. Beneath that cloth was the animal he would bond with. He tried to guess what it could be from the size of the enclosure. The cage was large, up to his chest. Occasionally he could hear scratching noises from underneath it.

This was the animal he’d spend the rest of his life with. The animal that would make him triumph.

Zerif handed the flask to the boy. His smile was as wide and encouraging as a jackal’s. “Just one sip will do it.”

The boy wiped his sweaty palms on his shirt. This was it. Nobody would ever question him again.

Nobody would ever doubt his strength.

He was not the Trunswick family’s first failure. He was its first legend.

Through the open top of the flask, the Bile smelled dreadful. Like hair burning.

He remembered the glorious taste of the Nectar, like butter over honey. It had been so remarkable, until it had gone wrong.

Now he raised the flask to his lips, and without another thought, gulped down the Bile. He had to fight hard not to gag — it was like drinking death itself, and the ground that death was buried in. But within that blackness, he felt something coming alive within him — something vast and strong and dark. His body could barely contain the thing that grew inside him. In that instant, he felt no terror. He only felt that he could create terror.

Still smiling, Zerif whisked the cover off the cage.

GREENHAVEN

“I’M NEARLY THERE, URAZA,” ABEKE SAID, slipping a bracelet over her slender brown hand. Her words were directed at the leopard that paced the floor of her room. Because the room was much too small for a leopard, or because the leopard was much too large for the room, the big cat could only take a few steps in each direction before she huffed and twisted the other way.

Abeke could sympathize.

In just a few short weeks, their world had shrunk from their home in wide-open Nilo to a tangled training camp, and then shrunk again to this island fortress: Greenhaven, the headquarters of the Greencloaks, guardians of Erdas. Abeke supposed that the fortress was impressive — a sprawling stone castle built on top of a waterfall — but both she and Uraza were of the mind that the forest surrounding it looked more appealing.

Outside the window, a bell sounded from a distant tower. Three tolls: the call to training.

Uraza paced even harder, making low, grunting sounds.

“All right, we’ll go!” Abeke tightened her bracelet so it wouldn’t slip off. Although its strands looked like wire, they were actually boiled elephant tail hair. Four knots in the strands symbolized sun, fire, water, and wind. Her perfect sister, Soama, had given it to her as she’d left home. It was supposed to bring good luck.

But Abeke wasn’t sure if *good luck* was really what she had been having since she left Nilo. She’d summoned a Great Beast as a spirit animal, which seemed like good luck. But almost immediately after that, she’d been recruited by people who were secretly in cahoots with the Devourer, enemy of the known world. Definitely bad luck.

The Greencloaks had agreed to take her in once she’d discovered her mistake; Abeke knew that she was probably supposed to consider that as good luck. After all, they hadn’t had to let her switch sides. But it didn’t feel very lucky at the moment. She’d made one friend since this whole thing began — Shane — and he was still on the other side, with the Conquerors. She’d traded her only friend for three kids who didn’t trust her.

Really, Abeke would settle for the good luck of not getting lost in the giant Greencloak fortress again.

As she opened the door, she donned the green cloak that meant she had sworn to defend Erdas. The dim hallway was full of sound. A monkey screamed a laugh somewhere out of

sight, and a man's voice rumbled low beneath it. A donkey brayed. Something like hoofbeats or pattering footsteps resonated through the stone walls. Abeke ducked as a bird the color of a banana soared overhead.

At the sight of the bird, Uraza, however, leaped skyward with a gleeful and rather threatening growl. The banana-colored bird shrieked. Just before the leopard slapped her paws together, Abeke grabbed her tail. The leopard's leap was brought up short with a yowl.

Uraza spun. For a moment her teeth were instinctually bared and menacing.

Abeke's heart stopped.

Then the leopard realized it was Abeke's hand on her tail. Her lips lowered. She gave Abeke a deeply wounded look. The bird flapped away.

"I apologize," Abeke said. "But that was someone's spirit animal!"

One would think a Great Beast would understand why it wasn't right to eat someone else's spirit animal, but with Uraza, sometimes the beast part outweighed the great part.

"Maybe we should do this," Abeke told Uraza, holding out her arm as a request. All spirit animals had the ability to enter a dormant form. If Uraza chose to enter it now, she would become a tattoo on Abeke's skin until they got to training. And tattoos had never eaten anyone else's spirit animal.

But Uraza was tired of being cooped up. She considered Abeke's outstretched arm for one long moment, and then

she turned and stalked down the hall.

Abeke didn't press the issue. They were going to be late. As she hurried down the hallway after the leopard, various Greencloaks waved and greeted her by name. Abeke felt bad that she couldn't return the favor, but they all knew her more than she knew them. All four of the newcomers at the fortress — Abeke, Rollan, Meilin, and Conor — were well-known. The four kids who had somehow summoned the Four Fallen.

Uraza made a curious trilling sound as she leaped down a circular stairwell in front of her. At the bottom, both Abeke and Uraza hesitated. They faced two identical halls, each with plaster-white walls and exposed timber ceilings. Only one led to the training room.

"Uraza?" Abeke asked. Uraza's violet eyes darted from the floor to the ceiling, her long tail thrashing slowly.

Suddenly, Abeke didn't think she looked so much like a leopard deciding which way to go. Instead, she looked like a leopard about to —

Uraza lunged. She was a muscled blur of gold and black as she pushed off the wall. A thrumming, heart-chilling growl burst from her. For one moment, Abeke just thought, *What an amazing animal!*

Then she realized that Uraza was on the hunt. The leopard's unlucky prey crouched on a notch in the plaster wall. It was a small, squirrel-like animal with pink feet, a striped back, and large eyes. Abeke thought it was a sugar glider.

Uraza thought it was delicious.

“Uraza!” Abeke snatched for the leopard’s tail again, but missed. The sugar glider leaped toward the opposite wall. As it flew, its tiny limbs stretched out from its body. There was skin webbing between all its legs, making its body into a furry sail.

Uraza pounced. The sugar glider darted out of her way. The two of them careened down the hall. The sugar glider soared onto a side table. Uraza knocked the furniture over. The sugar glider scrambled up a tapestry of Olvan, leader of the Greencloaks. Uraza clawed the fabric from the wall. Tatters of Abeke’s dignity fluttered to the ground.

Helplessly, Abeke ran after them. She managed to get ahold of Uraza’s back leg, but the leopard tugged free easily. Abeke was left with a handful of black and yellow hairs.

The chase hurtled on. The three of them crashed through the hallway into a small eating room Abeke hadn’t seen before. People filled the benches. Abeke took the long way around the diners as the sugar glider and Uraza tore across the long table. Plates flew. One man got a faceful of his oatmeal. Another diner shut her eyes against an onslaught of fruit.

Outrage had just been added to the breakfast selection.

Abeke felt the Greencloaks’ eyes. She wanted to shout: *It’s her fault, not mine!* But she knew what their responses would be.

It is up to you to control your spirit animal.

Can't you control her?

This is your responsibility!

This is your failure.

Maybe you don't belong here after all.

There was no time for her to apologize or clean up the damage. She panted after the animals as they darted and clawed through several twisted hallways and a large room full of chairs, ending up in a foyer with an arched doorway on the other side. The sugar glider was making panicked, pitiful noises that sounded like a squeaky rocking chair.

Abeke was gasping too. Back in Nilo, she could track animals for hours without feeling she had taken a breath. What was this castle doing to her?

"Uraza," she said, grabbing a stitch in her side. "We are supposed to be here to *save the world* . . . so save your appetite!"

This made Uraza pause. The sugar glider had just enough time to hurl itself to the safety of the chandelier. Both Abeke and the sugar glider breathed a sigh of relief.

Uraza circled below, but the chase was over.

Now, Abeke thought with dismay, we are really lost.

Being lost wasn't the worst consequence either. Being *late* was. Not because it came with a steep penalty — her instructors were fairly understanding. But she knew her tardiness would only deepen the problems between her and the other three kids. They had begun their training together, while Abeke had still been in the clutches of the Devourer. She was not only the outsider, she was the suspicious ex-

enemy. She could only imagine what they thought she was doing right now — spying somewhere in the castle. Sending secret messages to Zerif, the Conqueror who'd taken her away after her Nectar Ceremony. Letting Uraza eat someone else's spirit animal.

She had to get to that training room.

Maybe there was someone inside that arched doorway who could help her find her way. Even if the room was empty, there was something tempting about the curved entry. Although it surely led to another room, something about it felt as if it led to the outside instead. Abeke couldn't quite explain the sensation to herself.

Cautiously, she pushed the door open. Inside was a dim room she'd never seen before. It was cluttered with musical instruments, mysterious pieces of art, and mirrors. There was a pile of drums as tall as Abeke, a piano-like instrument the size of a dog, and a bin full of flutes and recorders. A portrait of a girl smiled at her from one wall, while a mural of a man leading dozens of unfamiliar animals through a field covered another. The room smelled like dust and wood and leather, but also, to Abeke's delight, like the outdoors, though, again, she couldn't explain why.

A single man stood inside, partially turned away.

It was possible his spirit animal was in its passive state, but Abeke realized quickly that she wouldn't be able to tell. Apart from his face, every inch of visible pale skin was covered in tattoos: inked mazes, circles, stars, moons, knots, stylized creatures. The mark of his spirit animal

wouldn't stand out from the rest of the designs all over his body.

Abeke was suddenly impressed. Whether it was the man's intention or not, he had very cleverly hidden the identity of his spirit animal.

Even though what she could see of his face seemed young, his hair was gray. Nearly white.

He didn't seem to have noticed her silent entrance. His eyes downcast, he continued whispering to himself. Abeke couldn't quite make out the words, but it sounded like coaxing. She suddenly felt like she'd interrupted something quite secret, almost sacred. And in that dim, mirrored room, it was also just a little eerie.

She backed out. She'd find her own way back to training.

In the foyer, Uraza waited, her tail curled tidily around her own feet.

Abeke didn't have to tell the leopard she was upset with her. Uraza knew.

Without a word, Abeke held out her arm. And without a moment's hesitation, Uraza became a tattoo on her skin. It only stung for a second. Abeke started on her way. Back in Nilo she had been known for her tracking skills, hadn't she? She would find the training room. And she would make it her business to not get lost again.



The training room was the second-largest room in Greenhaven Castle. It was bright and inviting and had a

dazzlingly tall peaked ceiling for the high-flying spirit animals. One end of the room was devoted to weapons' storage — spears, maces, slingshots. Anything you might hope to find, so long as it would leave a mark. Stained-glass windows lined the walls, each one featuring a different Great Beast.

As she stepped in, Abeke was uncomfortably aware of suspicious eyes on her. Rollan, the scruffy orphan who had summoned Essix the Falcon, frowned at her. Meilin, standing near the panda Jhi, kept her striking face intentionally expressionless. Only Conor, the blond boy with pale skin who had summoned Briggan the Wolf, offered a faint smile in Abeke's direction.

Tarik, the Greencloak who was in charge of their training and their futures, stood in front of a folded fabric screen. His weathered, lean face was only a little lighter than Abeke's. Right now it wore a perplexed frown. "Abeke, didn't you hear the training bell?"

There was no point blaming it on Uraza. She knew what Tarik would say: *You're going to have to learn to work with Uraza in far more difficult situations than our hallways.* And she didn't want to give the others more reasons not to trust her.

Abeke said, "I'm sorry. I got lost." She hurriedly released Uraza from her arm.

"Lost?" Meilin rolled her eyes. She turned to Tarik. "Now can we start? Every minute we stand here doing nothing, a city in Zhong falls to the Conquerors."

“That’s a lot of cities,” Rollan interjected. “Do you mean eleven cities have fallen while we’ve stood here? How many do you think fell during *breakfast*? That was nearly twenty minutes! How —”

“Rollan, that is no joking matter,” Tarik said. “And Meilin is right. Time is precious. But I think it will be more efficient if we train together. Today, you’ll engage in hand-to-hand combat with other Greencloaks.”

Meilin smirked, certain of her abilities.

“I call dibs on the mace,” Rollan said. “And the brass knuckles.”

“Not so fast,” Tarik said. As he spoke, four other Greencloaks entered the room. Though their spirit animals were in passive form, the four newcomers held their arms in such a way to display their tattoos to the four kids — like the Greencloaks were introducing the animals, even though they weren’t physically present. There was a llama, a fruit bat, a lemur, and a mountain lion.

Tarik continued, “You won’t always have access to weapons. In fact, an attack will more often come when you’re not ready — while you’re sleeping or eating. So you will not be using those weapons.”

He pulled aside the folded screen behind him. The wall behind it was hung with frying pans, broomsticks, plates, pillows, and other ordinary objects.

He said, “You’ll be using these.”

“Oh, I did that every day in my old life,” Rollan joked.

“This is ridiculous,” Meilin argued. “Maybe a street urchin is willing to fight with these crude tools, but I could do better with my bare hands.”

Abeke exchanged a look with Conor. They both moved to the wall to get weapons. Neither bothered complaining.

“Grab the first one you come to,” Tarik said. “And when I whistle, change to another object.”

Abeke took a broomstick. Conor took a fork.

“Here,” Rollan said, offering Meilin a handkerchief from the wall. “This one won’t scratch up your noble hands.”

Meilin smiled prettily. Removing the frying pan, she handed it to him. “And here’s one for you. Doesn’t require much brains to figure out how to use it.”

Rollan pretended to bow.

“Everyone to their marks,” Tarik ordered.

They took their places, the other Greencloaks opposite. Abeke faced a middle-aged man with a lemur tattoo and friendly-looking, wide eyes. The sword he held was not quite so friendly looking.

“I’m Errol,” the man said, touching his chest.

“My name is Abeke,” Abeke replied.

He smiled warmly at her. “I know.”

Tarik’s voice rose above the introductions. “Older team: Keep your spirit animals in passive form. Younger team: You may use all powers you have at your disposal. The object is to disarm your opponent. And if you manage that, to pin them to the ground.”

“For how long?” Meilin asked. “How will we know if we’ve won?”

“There is no win or lose here, Meilin,” Tarik replied. “We don’t have time for games. What I want is for you to show me that you can neutralize an opponent so I feel more comfortable putting you in a real-life dangerous situation. Now. Are we ready? Three, two?”

Putting his fingers to his lips, he let out a sharp, piercing whistle. The training battle began.

Right away, Abeke knew that her broomstick would be no match for Errol’s sword. So, drawing on her past in Nilo, she hurled her broomstick like a spear. The stick bounced harmlessly off his chest. Grinning at her, he picked it up.

“I’ll let you have one free pass,” Errol said, offering her the broomstick. In the background, iron clanged and Rollan swore joyously. “But remember that thing doesn’t have a point on it. If you tossed it at me in a real fight, you’d just end up empty-handed as I came at you with my blade.”

Abeke’s cheeks felt warm. “Of course.”

“But well-thrown,” he said. “Here’s a hint: Use that broomstick defensively, and count on your spirit animal as your weapon. And the other way around, if you find yourself with a real weapon.”

“Thanks,” she said. Then, suspicious of his kind smile, she added, “Don’t go easy on me.”

“That wouldn’t be a favor,” Errol said. “We want you prepared when you get out there. Don’t go easy on *me*.”

Abeke stole a glance at the others. Meilin sat on the shoulders of her opponent, the silk handkerchief wrapped around her assailant's eyes. *If Meilin can do so well with just a scrap of cloth, Abeke thought, I have to be able to work with a broom!*

This time, when Errol came at her with the sword, she used the broom like a long staff instead, blocking his blows as best as she could. His strikes became steadily harder, though, and the broom handle began to splinter.

"Sorry!" Abeke said.

He looked confused. "For what?"

"For this!" With a pang of conscience, Abeke thrust the broom bristles into the swordsman's face. Sneezing, he swatted at the noxious cloud of dust, hair, and animal fur surrounding his head. He blindly windmilled his sword.

Well, he said not to go easy on him.

"Uraza!" Abeke called. "Now!"

Just as Errol's sword split her broomstick in two, shards flying, the leopard pounced. Her paws clapped on his chest. With a grunt, he fell back, catching himself with his hands. His sword clattered away.

Uraza licked a paw serenely.

Errol gave Abeke a thumbs-up from his place on the floor. Abeke smiled at him. It was nice to feel accepted.

Tarik's whistle sounded.

"New weapon!" he shouted. "Now, this round, I want you fighting as a team. Hurry! Grab something, quick."

Abeke snatched up a heavy wooden mixing bowl. Conor took a spoon. Meilin and Rollan argued over a vase. Meilin ended up with the porcelain bottom and Rollan ended up with the dry flowers inside it.

“Wait —” Rollan said.

Tarik let out his shrill whistle. “As a team, go!”

This time, all four Greencloaks attacked at once, and the four kids moved as one against them. Abeke’s wooden bowl served well as a shield. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Conor and Briggan working together, darting forward and back.

Smart, thought Abeke. Conor’s been taking his training to heart. He would be prepared even if he was surprised out in the open, with no weapon at all.

In fact, she was awed by their progress. Although he and Briggan had been gradually improving at each training session, this was a huge leap forward.

Suddenly, the older Greencloaks changed tactics, turning to Abeke at the same time. She found herself facing two swords, a spear, and an axe — impossible to hold off on her own, even with Uraza.

Uraza snaked beneath a Greencloak, her flexible body low to the ground. One paw darted out, claws sheathed safely away. The Greencloak with the llama tattoo careened to the ground, unbalanced. Abeke used her bowl to knock back the bat-tattooed Greencloak. Uraza sprang onto his shoulders effortlessly. The weight of the big cat brought him to his knees.

But the success was short-lived. The other two Greencloaks came at her while Uraza was occupied. Errol's sword smacked her bowl right out of her hands. As it flew up into the air, the other Greencloak slammed her with the broad side of his training axe, hard enough to throw her to the ground and knock the breath out of her.

Abeke gasped as her palms scuffed over the floor.

Tarik's whistle shrieked. It sounded a little irritated, louder and longer than usual.

"What was *that*?" Tarik demanded. "This was not a spectator event! Where were you three? How could you let her go down like that?"

Conor had the good manners to look ashamed. Rollan acted like it simply hadn't occurred to him to help. Meilin's carefully painted face remained haughty. They didn't explain themselves, but they didn't have to.

They don't trust me, Abeke thought, her eyes prickling with tears. The days of the others' distrust piled up inside her along with the ache of her scuffed palms and the humiliation of having been so badly beaten. She wouldn't cry in front of them. Especially not in front of Meilin. She was sure Meilin didn't cry over anything.

"I'm deeply disappointed," Tarik said. "Part of good strategy is making good use of all your assets. Abeke is one of your assets, and you should have protected her."

Conor offered his hand to Abeke. She hesitated before accepting it. He hauled her up.

"Sorry," he said.

On the other end of the room, footsteps rang out through the uncomfortable silence. It was Olvan, the regal leader of the Greencloaks. As always, his movements were slow and deliberate. There was something imposing about him, even when his spirit animal, a moose, wasn't visible.

Rubbing his beard, he surveyed the wreckage: shattered glass, broken broomsticks, dried flower petals. "Tarik, I don't like to interrupt. But this is important."

"Go ahead," Tarik said. He was still frowning at three of his four pupils. When he nodded at the four Greencloaks, they nodded back and exited. Errol waved to Abeke as he left. It was kind enough that it made her want to cry again.

"We've confirmed that one of the Great Beasts is in the north of Eura," Olvan said. "Rumfuss the Boar. It's not a far journey from here. The four of you and the Fallen must travel immediately to find out more. Tarik, you will lead them again."

"Yes," Rollan said. "*Finally*. Let's leave all this cutlery behind."

Tarik's brow furrowed. "I don't know much about the North."

Olvan seemed unconcerned. "I'll be sending Finn with you. He's from that area and can act as a guide."

"Finn?" Tarik echoed. He didn't add anything else, but the single word was enough to make Olvan raise a thick eyebrow. It was unlike Tarik to question Olvan.

"Concerns, Tarik?" Olvan asked brusquely. But his tone didn't seem to encourage a confession. Tarik merely shook

his head.

“It will be good to have another set of hands,” Meilin said.

“Finn was once a great warrior, but now he’s seen too much battle,” Tarik answered carefully. “He will only be useful as a scout.”

“But a very good scout,” Olvan insisted. “He will not fight for you, but he will stand by you. There can be no question of that. Here he is.”

Finn entered the room with footfalls much softer than Olvan’s had been. Abeke’s head darted up. At once her humiliation was forgotten, replaced by interest.

Finn was the tattooed man from the mirrored room.
And their lives would soon be in his hands.

LETTER

THE FIRST THING CONOR DID TO GET READY FOR THE journey was head to the kitchen. He didn't have a problem existing in dirty clothing or without weapons as long as he had enough food to last the trip. The cool basement kitchen was dug right into the rock foundation of the fortress, and it was very full. Greenhaven required quite a lot of cooks — not only were there a lot of Greencloaks, there were more than a few spirit animals with very strange diets. So Conor tried to grab jerky, crackers, and dehydrated fruit from under elbows and over shoulders and around hips. He had to keep saying, "Excuse me," and "I'm sorry," and "Oh, was that your eye?!"

"Oh, love," said one of the cooks, a woman who looked a lot like a decorative pillow, "we will do that for you. You are too good to be in the kitchen!"

"Oh, *no*," Conor protested fervently. The kitchen was one of the only places in Greenhaven where he felt remotely

comfortable. He came from a shepherd family and, until the last year or so, had grown up in fields. It wasn't the easiest life, but it was simple, and he'd been good at it. He knew his place, and it wasn't this magnificent fortress. This kitchen was closer.

"Oh, yes," the cook replied with a laugh. "You've bonded with a Great Beast! You're destined for greatness!"

With a hint of panic, Conor shoved some more jerky into his pack. The idea that he was destined for greatness was not a cozy one. His former noble employer, Devin Trunswick, would certainly have argued against it.

"Look, the messenger boat's come in!" called an older, bearded cook. Peering out of the small window, he beckoned for Conor to join him. The fortress sat up high above the shore, and though the beach was not close, the building's lofty vantage point let Conor see all the way down to where a small boat had scuffed onto the rocky sand. In the afternoon light, two messengers climbed out. One walked purposefully toward the castle, but the other began to run, heading for the main entrance of the fortress.

Why run? Conor wondered with a frown. *What is the hurry?*

As Conor watched the two messengers, the cooks took advantage of his distraction to pack his bag full of food, including a large bone for Briggan. A few minutes later, the running messenger disappeared around the side of the fortress, and the other, to his surprise, came right to the

kitchen. She had a mailbag. And one of the letters was for Conor.

Conor accepted the letter, trying to keep the shock off his face. He knew very few people who would write to him. Although he was close to his family and their small farming community, none of the peasantry could read or write very well. In all the time he'd served the Trunswicks, he'd only received a single letter from his family. They'd paid a week's earnings to hire the Finley girl, who was training to be a scribe, to scratch it all down. The younger Trunswick brother, Dawson, had read it aloud to him — when he wasn't too busy laughing at the penmanship.

Devin Trunswick was very capable of writing a letter, but it was impossible to imagine him writing one to his former servant. Conor could still remember the open hatred in Devin's gaze as Tarik led Conor away from the crowd during their Nectar Ceremony.

Which was why Conor was surprised to see what looked like Devin's handwriting. It was a little more jiggly and uneven, but the capital letters looked the same.

"Letter from home?" asked the pillow cook. Somehow figuring out from his hopeless expression that he couldn't read it, she added kindly, "Shall I read it to you?"

"Yes, thank you."

Wiping her hands on her apron, the cook took the letter and scanned to the bottom. "It's from your mother!"

Conor's heart soared for just a moment before crashing back to the earth. It couldn't be true. Conor's mother

couldn't read or write.

Dear Conor,

I have wanted to send you a letter for a long time, but as you know, I could not write. Devin Trunswick's little brother, Dawson, has kindly agreed to write it for me. He says he needs the practice with his handwriting anyway. He is a fine boy!

I do not have much time before my evening duties, but I wanted to let you know that we are proud of you. Sadly, things have gotten worse since you left. I have had to take your place as Devin's servant, as our debt to Lord Trunswick was still large when you left. Also, a very cold spring killed many of our lambs and the wolves have been getting desperate. We lost two of our dogs to them this season. Food is scarce. We must hand over almost everything we earn to the Trunswicks to pay our debt. I do not mean to scare you, but it is hard to make ends meet without your labor. Please ask the Greencloaks if they could send food for us this winter. Surely it is the least they can do for us as you work with them now. I would not ask if it was not dire.

With all of my love, Your mother

P.S. This is Dawson. I am sorry that your family is so hungry. My father will not forgive their debt. I asked him.

Conor didn't say anything. It was bad enough to imagine his mother as Devin's servant, but also to imagine his family starving? He didn't want to picture it, but he couldn't help seeing disaster striking. They had been close enough to it when his father had asked him to go work for Devin. Even as he'd hated leaving for Trunswick, even as he'd wondered why *he* was the sibling who had to go, he'd known that otherwise they would have starved. Suddenly the bag of food he'd packed felt like a luxury.

"I'm sure they'll be all right," said the pillow cook, draping her arm over Conor's shoulders and giving him back the letter. "Giving you up to Briggan is just their sacrifice to save Erdas. You heard what she said! She's proud of you!"

One of the other cooks handed Conor his bag. "As are we," she added. "Now, off with you. Briggan's lad doesn't belong in a kitchen, no matter where he came from."

But if I don't belong in a field or kitchen anymore, Conor thought, and I don't feel like I belong in a castle, then where do I belong?

MOON TOWER

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FORTRESS, MEILIN PACED IN THE map room. As she moved around the room, her hands behind her back, she did her absolute best to avoid looking at the three-hundred-pound panda in the room with her. It wasn't that she didn't like Jhi. It was just that looking at her reminded Meilin of precisely everything that was angering her at the moment.

In front of Meilin was a map of Erdas. All the continents were neatly drawn in burgundy ink: Amaya, Nilo, Eura, and Zhong. Someone had lightly drawn in another continent, Stetriol, near the bottom of the map. Meilin put her finger on it. This was where the Conquerors were coming from. Where the Devourer was coming from.

Meilin traced her finger to Zhong. It wasn't very far at all. No wonder Zhong was the first to be attacked.

Is my father still alive? she wondered. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the general's face.

Meilin dragged her finger from Zhong to Eura. It seemed like a much farther distance than Stetriol to Zhong.

Why am I here? she thought furiously. *Why am I not there fighting? And why do I have such a useless spirit animal?*

She wished the others were ready to go. Meilin had selected her weapons and supplies and packed with the efficiency her father had taught her. She wasn't surprised that the others were slower. They probably weren't used to having enough belongings to even learn how to pack.

It felt a little better to be going on a mission, but doubt chewed at her. How was chasing down the other Great Beasts supposed to do anything to help Zhong *now*?

Meilin spun. Jhi sat silently behind her. The black spots around her eyes made her look a little sad. She was so slow. So peaceful. Sure, she had some healing powers, but not enough to save someone mortally wounded. Jhi would be a very useful ally if the Devourer needed to be cuddled to death.

Fury bubbled in Meilin.

The door opened. Immediately, Meilin composed her face. She wouldn't let anyone see her truly upset. Especially not if it was Rollan.

And it *was* Rollan, along with Conor, Abeke, and Finn. They seemed in high spirits, apart from Finn, whose youthful face was as masked as Meilin's. In the lamps of the map room, his gray hair looked nearly white.

"It's a little late to be studying up on geography," Rollan said to Meilin. Essix sailed in behind him, tucking her wings

to keep from singeing them on the torches.

"I was bored," she replied stiffly. "I finished packing hours ago."

"Let me guess," Rollan said. "You took a class in it. Four tutors taught you how to fold your clothing."

"For the record, I traveled a lot with my father. I taught myself." Meilin turned to Finn. "Tell me again why our mission is so important?"

Quietly, Finn explained, "If we truly can find Rumfuss the Boar, we might be able to persuade him to give up his talisman. I understand you four retrieved one from Arax the Ram. The Devourer seeks these talismans to use them in the war, and we must beat him to them."

"If," Meilin echoed. "If we find the boar. If we persuade him to give us the talisman. What if we don't?"

Finn gave her a very long look. "I don't think we should bank on failure so early, do you?"

Suddenly Tarik flew into the room, cloak swirling, face grim. "I'm sorry to be late, but I have very bad news."

Meilin's stomach lurched. She felt like Tarik was looking at her in particular.

Father!

Sure enough, Tarik's eyes held hers a moment longer. He said, "Zhong has fallen to the Conquerors."

"No . . ." she whispered.

"I'm afraid so," Tarik said. "The capital city has been taken over. And, Meilin — your father is missing."

Meilin folded her arms to hide their shaking. She wanted to cry, but she wouldn't let herself do so in front of the others, all of whom were trying very hard to look at anything but her. Instead, as devastation burned behind her eyes, she shouted, "I should have never come here! There's absolutely no point to having me along on a — a *treasure hunt* across the globe! I should've been fighting by his side." She shot a poisonous look at Jhi. "And *you* — !" The panda met Meilin's glare with her own gentle gaze, cutting the girl short. Jhi's presence was a painful reminder of home.

All Meilin could think of was the colorful roofs of Jano Rion burning. Zhong fallen! Her father missing!

"Meilin," started Tarik. "I know that this is terrible news, but finding Rumfuss is really the most helpful step you can take right now."

"I don't believe that!" she snapped. She thought she could feel some sort of emotion coming off Jhi, but she pushed it away. "There's no guarantee that we'll find him, and there's no guarantee that he'll give us the talisman, and even if he does, there are more than a dozen left to go! Zhong needs me *now*."

"You're only one girl," Tarik said. "Here, you're part of a team."

Meilin's cold gaze flitted across Conor, Rollan, Abeke, and Finn. The servant, the orphan, the traitor, and the warrior who had given up war.

Not much of a team, she thought.

"You cannot force me," she said. "I'm going back to Zhong."

"You can't," Conor said, an unbearable concern in his voice.

"Watch me," Meilin shot back.

Conor stuttered, "B-but we *need* you."

"Zhong needs me." Turning to Jhi, she added, "*You* can stay here."

Storming from the room, she slammed the door behind her. She hurried down the hall so fast that the flaming lamps flickered as she passed. She hoped no one tried to come after her. All she wanted was to get her bag and a horse and go. She'd follow the main trade road back to Zhong.

She was nearly back to her room when a hand caught her arm.

"Meilin."

She spun. It was Finn. She didn't know how he caught up to her so silently.

Meilin's expression darkened. Trundling behind him was Jhi. Slower, of course. Not much louder, though.

"You can't keep me here," she said.

Finn tossed her arm away. Almost contemptuously, so she could see how he never intended to physically contain her. In a way, it made her feel better that he wasn't trying to spare her feelings, like Tarik or Olvan might have. She didn't want to be coddled.

He said, "I left a place once in anger. Leaving in anger means returning in regret. I don't want that for you."

I'm not returning, Meilin thought. *So the regret won't matter*. But something about the way he spoke, calm and measured, reminded her a little of her father. So she said, "I'm listening."

"You did your spirit animal a bad turn back there," Finn continued. "Has she ever done the same to you?"

Glancing at Jhi out of the corner of her eye, Meilin felt a little stab of guilt . . . but not enough guilt to change her mind. Out loud, she said, "No! She does practically nothing. The bond was wrong. I'm sure she'd be happier with a different girl." Actually, Meilin thought that Jhi would have been perfect for the girl everyone back in Zhong had *thought* she was. Very few had known about her combat lessons or her interest in strategy. Most saw only the carefully made-up girl who looked so pretty as she strolled in the tea garden or handled the cocoons for silk-making. Jhi would have looked right at home with that public Meilin.

"I don't know if you're so different," Finn said. "Will you come with me? I'll show you something. If it doesn't interest you, you can leave and I won't be the one to stop you."

Meilin reluctantly followed him to a foyer with an iron chandelier, and then through an arched doorway. The room inside was cluttered with dusty mirrors, musical instruments, and objects Meilin saw no use for. It reminded her of all the useless weapons at the morning's training exercise. This room was piled with things that would serve as shoddy weapons. The mess of it irritated her. What was the purpose, she wondered, of a room full of disorganized

junk? Even if there was something useful in here, no one would be able to find it.

“What is this place?”

“This is the Moon Tower,” Finn said. “It’s a place where Greencloaks can form deeper bonds with their spirit animals.”

“My bond is fine,” Meilin replied crisply. Jhi sat down heavily beside a dusty gong. “She would go into passive form on the first day. Rollan is still struggling.”

Finn raised his eyebrows. “I wouldn’t compare myself with Rollan. We are our own competition.”

Shocked, she said, “My father said that very same thing to me.”

“Well then,” Finn said with a ghost of a smile. “He must be very wise. Now, this tower isn’t for training. It’s more like play, or meditation. Sometimes music, art, or logic games will encourage a stronger bond and reveal hidden skills.”

Meilin sighed in frustration. “I know her skills. But she’s nothing like me.”

Finn’s expression sharpened. “You do everyone a disservice when you forget who you really are. Is combat all there is to you?”

She opened her mouth and then closed it. The question was maddening in its silliness. “Of course not. But my home has already been taken. It’s what Zhong — what my father — needs of me at the moment!”

“And at the end of all this?”

Meilin raised her hands in a helpless gesture. “We’ll see about that once we get there. If we get there.”

“Take my word on it: That might be too late. Balance, Meilin. Surely your father told you that. Look at this.” He pulled up his sleeve, looking for one tattoo among the tangle of tattoos. Finally, he pressed his finger to a symbol inked between a tangled thorn tree and a collection of pictograms. It was a circle, divided in half with a wavy line. One half was light. The other half was dark.



Meilin was again shocked. “That’s a Zhongese symbol. How do you know it?”

“I was one of the Greencloaks’ greatest warriors. I have been all over Erdas in my time. So you know this symbol?”

Of course she did. “One side is light, one side is dark. One side is active, the other is passive. Day and night.”

“Opposites,” Finn said. “But both part of the same whole.”

Meilin worked hard to quell her indignation. She was getting tired of Greencloaks telling her she needed to make more of an effort to bond — as if she hadn’t been trying.

“How does that do me any good?”

Finn gestured to the things around them. “This is a place to find out.” When she still looked unconvinced, he said,

“I’m using this room myself. Would you like to hear the story?”

She merely raised an eyebrow in response.

He began, “My final battle was near Zhong, in Oceanus. My brothers and I were ambushing a small band of the Devourer’s allies. There were fifty of them and only five of us, but we had fought worse odds with our spirit animals. Five Marked siblings in one family, yes,” he said in response to Meilin’s puzzled look. “The Greencloaks told us we were *chosen*. I was supposed to accomplish so many great things.” Finn said this last part with a bitter smile that gave Meilin a stab of anxiety. The Greencloaks were saying the same thing about her.

“I was known to be clever with the making of things, so my brothers asked me to build a trap. It was a cunning one, a great pit with young trees bent this way and that over it. Over the top of their flexible trunks, I’d woven in brush with the roots still hanging, so the plants would stay green. When I was done it looked just like a grassy bank. Just another hill to climb. It was strong enough to support one man, but the trees would give way under the weight of more than one. Then all we’d have to do is wave at the enemy from up above after they’d all fallen through.

“Half of the Conquerors were meant to fall in it before the other half even knew what was going on. But then something went terribly wrong. They discovered the trap — or rather, their spirit animals did. Somehow, all fifty of them had bonded with spirit animals. That’s impossible, but they

had. So it was not only fifty Conquerors, but fifty Conquerors aided by fifty spirit animals.”

Meilin made a soft noise of disbelief — bonding with spirit animals was so rare that it was hard to imagine fifty Marked individuals in one place, outside of the Greencloaks.

But Finn’s face was serious. “You doubt it. I doubted it myself. Like I said: impossible. But *you’re* also impossible. No one can summon a Great Beast, and yet the four of you have. It seems we have entered impossible times.”

Meilin inclined her head. True enough.

Finn continued, “The spirit animals discovered the trap easily, making it useless. There’s nothing dangerous about a hole no one falls into. My brothers and I tried to hold them off, but it was no use. There were too many of them. Imagine if you can, Meilin: fifty spirit animals. Animals we’d never seen before. Rhinos. Cougars. Anacondas. Scorpions. My brothers were slaughtered. It was — I barely . . . My youngest brother, Alec, distracted them so I could get away.

“Recovering has been difficult. It was horrific. Not just for me, but for my spirit animal, Donn. I nearly lost him. During the battle, he entered the passive state and now he will not come back out.”

Meilin’s eyes were wide. “Your brothers. That’s terrible. And your spirit animal . . . I didn’t know that could happen.”

Finn looked around the Moon Tower. “My spirit animal, Donn, and I had a very difficult bonding. I lived in a very remote village and the Nectar didn’t make it in time — I was the only child of age and the Greencloaks found me too late.

The Moon Tower helped us to find a measure of peace. I know it will help us again.”

Meilin said, “I want to ask a question, but it might be rude.”

Finn smiled a tiny smile. “I won’t be offended. There’s not much that can hurt me in this world anymore.”

“Was your hair always that color?”

Now Finn smiled ruefully as he patted the crazy gray-white spikes. “No. It changed after the battle. I woke up and my hair had gone completely white. Now — will you try to connect with Jhi here in the Moon Tower?”

Slowly, Meilin nodded. She didn’t think it could really change her mind, but after his terrible confession, she felt she owed it to him to try.

“What’s the right way to do this?” she asked.

“It’s play,” Finn said. “There is no right way.”

Meilin had never been a playful child. There had always been combat to train for, languages to learn, skills to conquer. There might have been time for play, but she hadn’t been interested. *Play* had never changed the world.

She took another look around the room. Before, she had found it disordered and useless. But with deeper examination, she saw a kind of organization. Drums gathered near paintings that had to do with earth and objects made of leather and wood. String instruments were near metal sculptures and mirrors and paintings of water. Woodwinds, paper objects, and anything having to do with air seemed to be grouped together.

Somehow this made her trust the room's purpose more. She had been educated in the usefulness of the arts. She would never be convinced there was a purpose for chaos.

Her eyes landed on an erhu, a traditional instrument from Zhong. She had received hours of lessons, but it had been months since she'd played. Taking up the bow, she crossed back to Jhi. Standing this close, Meilin could feel the heat radiating from the panda's body and smell the wet bamboo scent of her coarse fur.

Jhi rolled her gaze toward Meilin.

"I'm trying," Meilin said. "I'll try if you'll try."

Feeling a little foolish, she began to play. At first, she could only remember her instructor correcting her finger position and her bow technique. But after a few measures, she began to feel something else. A wide-open peace. Meilin knew that the emotion was coming from Jhi. This was part of the panda's power. Ordinarily this was where Meilin lost patience — she had no interest in being calm.

But she had promised Jhi she would try. Slowly the peace focused.

A very strange thing happened then. Meilin imagined she was surrounded by small, floating planets. Tinier moons circled some of them. She knew in a fuzzy, dreamy way that these orbs were her options. As the erhu sang sweetly in the background, Meilin realized that the closest little sphere represented the path back to Zhong. It was certainly the closest option, but it was also the smallest. And there were no other moon-choices floating around it.

With her decisions hovering outside of her mind, it was easy to tell that her plan to return to Zhong was logical, but reactive. And it was easy to see too that it left her with nowhere else to go.

Jhi's power kept pushing at Meilin. She glimpsed the orb that represented the choice of going in search of Rumfuss. It was a troubled, stormy planet, but it was surrounded by more choices, and each of those was surrounded by even more. It wouldn't be an easy choice, but it had more possibilities close by.

Meilin strained her neck to see it closer. Suddenly, in one of the orbs, she saw her father's proud face. *You've made the wise decision*, he said, *instead of the smart one. Well done.*

Meilin stopped playing all at once. The mysterious orbs vanished. Jhi blinked quietly at her.

"What happened?" Finn asked. Meilin had forgotten he was there.

Meilin didn't know how to explain it. The panda had helped her to *think*.

"I made a decision," she said. "I'm going with you."

JOURNEY

IT STARTED TO RAIN. IT RAINED AS THEY FETCHED HORSES FROM the stables. It rained as they left Greenhaven Castle. It rained while they loaded supplies onto the boat to Eura. It rained as the ship shoved off from the pier and into the storm-gray water.

It rained on everyone, but it especially rained on Rollan. He didn't get along with boats, so he stood at the railing and tried not to focus on his churning insides. He could bear being drizzled on if it meant he didn't throw up on anyone. Essix found a perch on one of the masts, looking a little unsettled herself. Stuffing her head under her wing, she quivered sickly.

It was strangely quiet; he could hear the rain falling on the ocean. Although the ship had sails, they were tied tightly away on the masts. He couldn't quite work out what propelled the ship. Far up ahead, though, he saw two odd

waves breaking again and again. Water pushed by the ship's hull, maybe? It didn't seem very likely.

"Whales." Abeke's clipped voice startled him as she joined him. The rain dribbling down her nose matched the rain dribbling down Rollan's. Uraza sauntered behind her, ears pinned in the damp, tail thrashing.

"Whales what?"

Abeke pointed. "Rockback whales. They're pulling the ship."

She indicated the odd waves. Now that Rollan focused on them, he could tell that they were indeed whales, not water. The beasts were as mottled gray and black as the stormy sea, and their spines were studded with stones and boulders. Like moving cliffs just beneath the water. They must have been longer than the ship itself.

Rollan was deeply impressed, but would have never admitted it out loud.

He asked, "How did you know?"

She didn't seem as if she wanted to answer, but she pressed her lips together and replied, "When I accompanied the Conquerors to look for the first talisman, we traveled in a ship like this. I'd never seen anything like it. There is not much opportunity to travel by ship in Nilo, much less a rockback-whale ferry."

For a few minutes, they both watched the rocky backs rise and fall. In the eerie hush, one of the whales called to the other. It was a hollow, echoey sound that seemed both very close and very far.

“Wow,” Abeke breathed.

“Creepy,” Rollan corrected. “Speaking of creepy, let’s talk about those Conquerors.”

It wasn’t the most tactful way to bring it up, but Rollan wasn’t really known for his tact.

Abeke raised an eyebrow but said nothing; it was hard to say if she was hurt by his words or hiding something. Rollan glanced toward the mast where Essix perched, her head still beneath her wing. Her intuitive power would have come in handy right about now, but she showed no signs of helping out.

“Well, you were fighting for them and all,” Rollan said. “I figured you might have the inside track on all things Conqueror.”

“I already told you how it happened,” Abeke replied stiffly.

“Tell me again. I love happy endings.”

She sighed. “Rollan, don’t you remember what it was like when you called up Essix? Was she what you expected?”

Of course she hadn’t been expected. Rollan hadn’t been expecting much of anything, as he had been sitting in a prison at the time, and in prison, disappointment was generally the most practical thing to expect. And even if he hadn’t been incarcerated, he couldn’t have expected Essix to appear. Nobody called up Great Beasts.

“Sure,” Rollan replied easily. “Miracles happen to me all the time.”

Abeke made a face. She touched the tuft of coarse fur at Uraza’s shoulders, as if for comfort. “Don’t you remember

how uncertain everything was? Nobody knows if they are going to call up a spirit animal at all. And the rituals make it so nerve-racking. Everyone is looking at you. There is so much pressure.”

“I didn’t have a ritual,” Rollan said. “I had a homeless guy and a rat. But I get the idea.”

Abeke stopped. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Actually, I don’t. That’s basically the beginning, middle, and end of it, anyway: homeless guy, rat, magical falcon. Happy ending. Told you. I love those things. Go on with your story.”

She said, “My ritual was very well attended. We desperately needed rain, and there was hope that a new rain dancer would be named. Then, all of a sudden I had a spirit animal, and it was a *Great Beast* and then it began to rain! My father had never looked at me like that before. My sister had never looked at me that way before — *no one* had. Everyone thought I was the new rain dancer. I was still trying to understand that I’d summoned a spirit animal! And then in the middle of the commotion, Zerif appeared and told me that he needed me to help save the world. Maybe you would have done better, Rollan, but during all that, I really didn’t think to ask him, *Are you telling the truth?*”

Rollan thought back to his own summoning. Zerif had appeared not long after Essix had. But Rollan *had* doubted him. And then taken off running.

To be fair, that was how Rollan approached most situations in life. He’d pulled the same stunt for the

Greencloaks too: doubt and run. Never a *bad* plan.

Abeke broke in ruefully, "You did ask him, didn't you? Or at least, you didn't trust him." When he looked at her, surprised, she added, "I could tell by your face. You were thinking I was foolish to go with him."

"A fool's better than a traitor."

Very serious, she nodded. "Rollan, I want you to know that I won't let the Greencloaks down."

I'm not a Greencloak, he thought. But he didn't say it out loud.

Instead, he watched Uraza slink damply after Abeke as they retreated to the ship's cabin. After they had gone, Essix flapped down to join him, her talons tight on the wet wood.

"Thanks for your help back there," he told her. "What do you think about her?"

Essix stretched out a leg and chewed on one of her talons.

"That," Rollan said, "is exactly how I feel about it."



It kept pouring. Once they made landfall, they transferred the supplies to the horses and set off through the damp evening. Technically, the horses were supposed to be a privilege. A way to make the long journey faster and more agreeable.

But practically, Rollan wished they were walking. Neither he nor Essix got along with his horse. For starters, Rollan wasn't the best of riders. Life as a street urchin hadn't

exactly prepared him for hours in the saddle. Back in Concorba, if he'd wanted to go somewhere, he'd gone on the bottoms of his own two feet. It was only because of their last mission that he'd had any experience on horseback at all. In fact, after that ride across Amaya, he still had blisters in all kinds of places where blisters shouldn't be.

Also, his horse was a terrible animal. Terrible to look at, with its flecked gray coat, and terrible to be around, with its habit of biting Rollan. If he relaxed his hold on the reins at all, the creature would bend itself almost in half to nip at his legs. It hated Essix too. If the falcon got anywhere near, the horse would rear and snap toward the bird.

"Maybe it's hungry," Conor suggested as they rode side by side through the drizzle.

"Hungry for human flesh, maybe," Rollan replied.

Overhead, Essix cried out; the horse pinned its ears back angrily. "Falcon flesh too."

"If you treat him with respect, he'll treat you with respect," Tarik called.

Easy for him to say, Rollan thought as Tarik and Meilin began a conversation about the pleasures of being taught horseback riding before one could walk.

After a few hours, Rollan was wet to the skin. His scruffy hair stuck to his forehead. The rolling, treeless countryside was already soaked green and black. Even if they'd wanted to stop, there was no shelter.

"Oh, yeah," he said, "this reminds me of home." He'd spent countless evenings on the streets, pressed against a

wall, barely out of the rain. Stomach growling, always hungry.

Well, at least now his stomach was full.

“Too tough for you?” Meilin asked sweetly. Her black hair was slicked on either side of her face.

“Oh, no,” Rollan replied. “I’m great at being cold and wet. One of my finest skills.”

Meilin shot back, “Did you have tutors for that?”

“I taught myself.”

She smiled at that, then hid it, fast. But Rollan had already seen. *Ha! Score one point for me.*

He was a little worried at how much he was getting used to *not* living on the streets, actually. He still hadn’t made up his mind over whether or not he wanted to work with the Greencloaks permanently, but if he left now, he’d have to get used to being hungry and dirty and mostly dead all over again. Just a few weeks ago, all he’d cared about was whether or not he’d get to eat once every three days. Now he had stopped worrying about meals and was instead concentrating on getting a smile out of a snotty general’s daughter.

Slippery slope, Rollan, he reminded himself. *Don’t forget how to be on your own.*

“It will be better once we get in the trees,” Tarik said, gesturing to a small copse of oaks ahead.

“We’ll need to be on our guard,” Finn spoke up, the first thing he had said since they mounted the horses. “Eura is

not as safe as it once was. You all should remember the lessons you learned in training before we left.”

The main lesson Rollan had learned in training was that Meilin was dangerous with a handkerchief.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Rollan’s horse stopped in its tracks and tried to take a bite out of his leg.

“No way!” he told it, jerking the opposite rein. “That’s my favorite leg.”

From down the road, Tarik said, “Your horse used to be a spirit animal. His human fell in battle. That’s why he’s so irritable.”

Rollan worked to save his favorite leg and then the other one. “Pretty shoddy reason.”

Abeke said thoughtfully, “I hear it’s unbearable if the bond is broken.”

“It’s true,” Tarik said. “As you four know, the bond is a powerful thing, and it gets stronger the longer you’re together. To lose your bonded partner is like losing a limb.”

Rollan’s horse made another grab at him. Yellow teeth snagged fabric and narrowly missed bone.

“I’m right on track to know what that feels like,” he muttered.

“Do you think the horse is jealous of Rollan and Essix’s bond?” Abeke asked.

There was not a lot to be jealous of. Essix would come to Rollan in a pinch, but they both seemed to be loners. Rollan couldn’t figure out a way to get through to the falcon — or even if he really wanted to. He’d gotten along fine before

she came along, and he figured he could probably manage fine after too. He guessed she felt the same way about him.

Tarik lifted a shoulder. "Possibly. Or it could just remind him of what he once had."

Rollan twisted to look at Abeke. Her bond with Uraza seemed pretty great. The leopard followed her as if the two of them were thinking the same thoughts. Wanting the same things. With Essix, Rollan felt they wanted the same thing about as often as any bird and boy would . . . which wasn't much at all.

Tarik's horse spooked, hooves stamping and scraping on the ground. Rollan couldn't immediately see what had startled it. Then he glimpsed a small, furry animal scrabbling up the horse's side. Tarik swiped at it with a surprised, hoarse laugh. He called out, "It's a weasel!"

Rollan curled his lip. He hated weasels more than his horse. They were like rats, but longer. Like snakes, but furrier.

"What's going on up there?" Finn asked from his position at the rear.

"I've got it under control!" Tarik called back, swatting at the biting and clawing animal. It looked like he was being attacked by a scarf. Behind him, Conor and Abeke clearly couldn't decide if they were allowed to laugh.

The weasel lunged for Tarik's eyes. Tarik blocked the animal — barely. His horse reared again.

Suddenly a surge of intuition jolted through Rollan, certain and overpowering and ferocious. His eyes found

Essix in the sky without having to search for her. The falcon's gaze was fixed on him as well. This was one thing they had in common: an uncanny ability to read people and situations. And when they worked together, the connection was — well, it was easy to see why Essix was called a *Great Beast*.

Now Rollan knew the truth as clear as if someone had shouted it to him.

Something was wrong.

This was an ambush.

"Watch out!" he shouted. "It's a trap!"

Finn scanned the woods, his expression sharpening.

"Conquerors! Arm yourselves!"

Two men plunged out of the brush, a fox on their heels. In a decisive move, one seized the bridle of Finn's horse and the other threw himself at Tarik. Lumeo, Tarik's spirit animal, an otter, twisted suddenly out of his dormant form. A third man charged from the trees, a badger on his heels.

Rollan's stomach dropped.

These new animals were no ordinary animals.

They were spirit animals.

Conquerors' spirit animals.

"Don't just stand there!" Meilin ordered, voice clear and ringing. "Attack!"

Rollan realized he had been frozen by the chaos. Up ahead, Tarik jumped off his horse and drew a knife against his human attacker, even as the weasel dug its teeth into his shoulder. The Conqueror easily avoided Tarik's knife —

the bond between him and the weasel was giving the man superhuman agility. More Conquerors emerged — too many to count. Everything was a mess of people and spirit animals. So many spirit animals.

Rollan kicked his horse to get closer to the fray. The action promptly caused the horse to swing its head to snap at him.

“No!” he said furiously. “You grass-burning chump! Look! They’re in trouble! Go that way!”

The horse bucked. Rollan clutched its neck to keep from flying off. Briggan loped by him, Conor close to his heels, dagger in hand. Abeke was right behind, wielding a large tree branch like a weapon as Uraza pounced. They all looked gloriously useful.

Overhead, Essix cried out. In falcon language, it clearly meant *Do something!*

“I’m *trying!*” Rollan said. “Where’s your sense of loyalty, horse?!”

The horse reared. This time, Rollan slid right off the back of his rain-slick saddle. Both his pride and his tailbone shouted angrily as he landed. The horse was gone faster than you could say *traitor*.

He clambered to his feet. Essix swooped low to see if he was okay.

At least somebody is loyal around here, he thought. He gave her a thumbs-up. He didn’t know if she understood. Falcons didn’t have thumbs.

Two other Conquerors were closing in on Tarik. One of them was bald and had a snake wrapped loosely around his arm. The other was dramatically mustached and had a small cat at his feet. As Tarik parried their blows with astonishing precision, Lumeo pounced on the cat in a chaos of fur and tooth. The cat's Conqueror was momentarily distracted and Tarik took advantage of this, delivering a roundhouse blow to his foe's midsection. The Conqueror stumbled back into Tarik's horse, who delivered a kick of its own, knocking the attacker unconscious. The cat fled to the woods.

Conor and Briggan were holding off the Conqueror who'd been joined by the badger — the man seemed to weaken as soon as Briggan got the badger clamped in his jaw. Finn stood in the shadows, head bowed, holding his side tightly. He seemed to be fighting a battle that existed behind his own closed eyes. The Conquerors hadn't noticed him yet. Close by, Meilin had been drawn farther away to fight with two other Conquerors. When Abeke approached with her tree branch to give aid, Meilin shouted to her, "I don't need *your* help!"

Abeke looked shocked, but she wasn't deterred. She leaped to rescue Finn as a Conqueror discovered him. It wasn't ideal, but Meilin, Abeke, and Finn looked like they were handling themselves. Tarik, on the other hand — he faced not only the persistent weasel, but also the bald Conqueror with the snake wrapped around his arm.

Rollan ran toward him. The weasel scrambled up Tarik's face. In that moment, the bald Conqueror tossed the

serpent. Blinded by the weasel, Tarik didn't immediately understand this new threat.

"Tarik!" Rollan shouted. "It's the snake!"

The Greencloak's hands tightened around the serpent. Too late. The snake's fangs sank into his arm. Tarik shook off the weasel and ripped the snake from himself, but he staggered. In this moment of vulnerability, the bald Conqueror raised his sword, about to deliver a killing blow.

There wasn't enough time for Rollan to reach him before the sword fell.

"Essix!" he yelled. Surely she would come through for him when it was really important.

The falcon dove, claws outstretched. She landed on the enemy's bald head a moment before he swung the sword. As the Conqueror flailed, nothing but feathers in his view, Rollan scrambled to seize the man's sword.

"Get it off of me!" the man screamed. His eyes were shut tight; Essix's talons were inches away from them.

Rollan clutched the sword threateningly. "If I do, will you leave us alone?"

"Anything!" the man said. "Trust me!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Rollan glimpsed the snake slither into the bald Conqueror's open hand.

"Unfortunately for you," said Rollan, "I don't trust anyone."

The Conqueror threw the serpent forward, but Rollan was ready. He swung the sword. The heavy blade sliced the snake neatly in two and kept on swinging.

Right into the Conqueror's leg.

Both Rollan and the bald man howled — the Conqueror in pain, Rollan in surprise. It was the first time Rollan had ever struck a human with a proper sword, and unbelievably, no one had been around to notice it. *Well, except Essix*, Rollan thought as the falcon flapped into the air with a dry, approving cry. He gave the falcon a hasty one-finger salute as he spun to deal with the remaining spirit animal. The weasel, however, had slunk into the trees. It must have been looking for its human partner.

The Conqueror continued wailing.

"Don't move a muscle," Rollan warned, sword still pointed at him. "You try to slither your way out of this one, you might lose something precious to you — like your life."

A cry pierced the air from where Conor had been fighting his foe. Without removing the sword's tip from his prisoner, Rollan glanced toward the commotion. Briggan held a Conqueror's spirit animal in his jaws — the badger Rollan had seen earlier. The Conqueror watched anxiously from the edge of the woods. With a growl, the wolf opened his jaws; the badger fell lifeless to the ground.

The Conqueror threw up his arm, trying to call the badger back to him. Nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing. No tattoo would form. The man let out an anguished cry. No one moved against him as he shifted to claim the badger. Without even a glance for the others, he disappeared with it into the forest.

Conor did not follow. There was a curious sadness in his face.

Rollan was unsympathetic. The Conqueror should have known: Don't bring a badger to a Great Beast fight.

Rollan turned his attention to Tarik, whose clothing was tattered and bloodstained.

"It looks worse than it is," Tarik muttered, teeth clenched in pain.

"That snake —" Rollan began.

"A Euran adder. I need to get the herbal antidote for the venom. Unfortunately, it will only get worse."

This sounded alarming to Rollan. "Have you been bit before?"

Tarik answered calmly, "No. But I have seen others."

"Can you walk?"

The Greencloak winced. "Is my horse gone?"

Nearby, Conor nodded grimly. Gone. In fact, aside from the Conqueror's groans, which Rollan thought were uncalled for, the forest had fallen uneasily silent.

Rollan called out for Meilin, Abeke, and Finn.

There was no reply.

"Where'd they go?" he asked Conor.

Conor pointed. "The others galloped that way. But we'd never catch up. Our horses are gone." Even Tarik's well-behaved steed had vanished, spooked by the combat.

"Well, this is a grand adventure," remarked Rollan. "Three missing and one chewed on. What do we do now?"

With a grimace, Tarik pushed himself onto an elbow. In a low voice so that the Conqueror couldn't hear, he whispered, "There's a Greencloak near here. An old informant. I think that's the best place to go. Finn knows her, and she will have the antidote. I'm afraid you'll have to help me walk, though."

Conor and Rollan each took one of Tarik's arms and hauled him up. Lumeo stood by his side, his coat uneven and sodden from the fight in the damp underbrush. His normally playful expression was keen, trying to anticipate what Tarik might need from him.

"It's all right, old friend," Tarik said to his spirit animal. He was shivering in an alarming sort of way. "Don't worry."

"Do you think the others are okay?" Conor asked. "You said Finn was just a scout. He doesn't fight, does he?"

"But Meilin does," Tarik said. "Very well, as we keep finding out. And Finn still has his wits. I am optimistic. But we'd better get going. It's not far. But with me like this, it will probably feel that way."



Tarik tried to be valiant, but it was clear that his condition was darkening with the evening. By the time night had fallen, he was quivering and clammy. Rollan wondered just how fast this antidote would work.

Finally, Tarik breathed, "There. There it is."

Conor exclaimed, "That's a castle!"

Rollan squinted at the single tower, gray and ghostly in the rainy dark. There was only one very short door and no discernible window openings. It looked like the sort of building an unimaginative child would build. "If it's a castle, where's the rest of it?"

"Beggars can't be choosers," Tarik said. "Help me down the path."

At the small door, he did a complicated knock.

Nothing happened.

He did it again. He told them, "Sometimes she pretends to be deaf."

The door opened. An old woman, tiny and as wizened as an ancient fruit tree, stood on the other side. She said, "*I am* deaf."

Rollan and Conor exchanged a look behind Tarik's head.

"Tarit," croaked the old woman. She had a voice like wood shavings. A faded green cloak hung on a peg just beside the door, but it looked as if it hadn't been moved for quite a while. "It's been a long time."

"Tarik," corrected Tarik.

"That's what I said," she replied. "There seems to be less of you than last time I saw you."

"A snake and a weasel ate the rest," Rollan said. "A Euran adder, to be precise. I'm not sure what kind of weasel."

The old woman noticed Conor and Rollan for the first time. "And two new Greencloaks, I see." Really, her voice sounded more like someone eating pebbles.

"One," corrected Rollan. "By which I mean, not me."

“Lady Evelyn,” Tarik said faintly. “These are the ones you must have heard about. The children who summoned the Fallen Beasts.”

The lady eyeballed them closely. It was not an entirely comfortable experience. She had a little bit of a mustache. Just a few white hairs. Rollan tried not to stare.

“Oh, no, Tarin, you must be mistaken,” she crackled. “There are four of *those* children. This is certainly only two.”

“*Tarik*,” he corrected again. “There was a scuffle on the road. We have lost touch with the other two for the moment.”

“You lost half of the Fallen? That seems careless,” the old woman — Lady Evelyn — said. Now her voice was more like stepping on a very large beetle. “Well, come in before you lose another half.”

Inside the tower was the opposite of the grand Greenhaven Castle. Straw covered the floor. Threadbare tapestries hung over the narrow window slits to keep the wind out. Something thin and gray boiled in a pot hanging over the fire. Circular stairs led up to nowhere. Rollan could see clear up into the blackness that must be the top of the tower; Essix had already soared up there to explore.

“I know what you’re thinking, not-a-Greencloak,” Lady Evelyn said. She was already puttering around in a collection of glass bottles and dried herbs, fingers searching across the cluttered windowsill. “Not a very pretty castle, that’s what you’re thinking. It wasn’t meant to be pretty. It was just a place to keep cattle after you stole them.”

"Who steals *cattle*?" Conor asked.

She cackled. "Who doesn't?"

"Me," he said.

Turning, she sniffed him. "Ah, you're a shepherd's son, though. You're a guardian, not a thief."

Conor, surprised at her intuition, sniffed his wet sleeve as if he possibly still smelled like his old life.

A soft whicker interrupted them.

"Ah," said Lady Evelyn. "This is my spirit animal, Dot."

Rollan grimaced. Another horse. Dot was a sway-backed black-and-white miniature horse the size of a dog. She also had a bit of a mustache. Just a few white hairs.

He whispered to Conor, "It's the opposite of a Great Beast."

Lady Evelyn chose that moment to be deaf. She instead knocked several plates and scrolls off the table and said, "Why don't you lay Tarbin down here, so I can get to mending him? You boys can dry off by the fire and help yourselves to dinner."

The boys hesitantly stripped off their cloaks to dry by the fireplace and peered into the bubbling cauldron. Every now and then, something white and shapeless would boil up to the surface and then descend into the gray liquid again. Conor whispered, "I don't know if that's food or laundry."

Rollan's stomach growled. It didn't care. "I ate my fair share of laundry on the fine streets of Concorba."

Conor poked it with a ladle. He scooped something brown and stringy from the bottom.

“Food,” Rollan declared. “Laundry is never stringy.”

Conor didn’t seem eager to sample it. Apparently shepherds’ sons had more refined palates than street urchins. Rollan tried the stew, or whatever it was. It tasted like a puddle in the bad part of town.

“How is it?” Conor asked.

“Delicious.”

Conor looked over to where Lady Evelyn was ministering to Tarik.

“Do you think he’ll be okay?” he asked.

Rollan didn’t want to lie. So he answered, “I don’t know.”

They ate in silence for a short time. Tarik was not entirely successful in stifling his pain. Eventually he quieted too. Neither Rollan nor Conor was sure of what this meant.

“Greencloak boy,” Lady Evelyn ordered from behind them. “And not-a-Greencloak boy. I need to talk to you. About your quest.”

They joined her at the table.

“Taril is fine now,” she told them in a low voice. “I gave him something to help him sleep. He will recover. But it will take some time. He is lucky the serpent didn’t strike closer to his heart. As it is, the venom will be hard to counteract. He will need constant rest and even more constant attention. Luckily, I never rest and am constantly attentive. However, he won’t be able to travel with you.”

“What?!” Conor cried. Both he and Rollan peered at Tarik. Though their mentor’s face was more peaceful now, his skin looked strange and slack, and his lips were oddly parched.

His breath came unevenly and his fingers still shook with the tremors Rollan had felt on the journey here. It was obvious he'd used the very last of his strength bringing them all here.

Rollan struggled with how to feel. Since he wasn't a Greencloak, he technically didn't owe Tarik any allegiance. But still — Tarik had trained him and protected him; he'd never been anything but kind to Rollan, even if Rollan wasn't sure if that was only because of Essix. It was difficult to see him like this. Utterly vulnerable. So close to death.

"He tells me another elder Greencloak — Fonn? Finn? Fann? — should find his way here with the remaining Fallen. If they don't get here by morning, though, you need to set off alone."

"Alone?" echoed Conor, dismayed.

"Time is of the essence. The Greencloaks are not the only ones who seek Rumfuss."

"But we don't know where to go," protested Conor.

A gaping chasm of uncertainty opened in Rollan's stomach, and it only grew wider and blacker the more he considered. They had just barely survived an encounter with a few Conquerors. Tarik had been doing this a lot longer than either Rollan or Conor, and now he was flat on a table being fed gruel. The last time the boys had faced off against a Great Beast, they'd had the help of adults. Even if by some crazy stroke of luck they managed to meet back up with Finn, the other Greencloak didn't fight. Which meant that the plan on offer right now involved Rollan and Conor

heading into the wilderness and then taking on Rumfuss on their own.

"I have a map," Lady Evelyn said. When neither of them looked excited by this confession, she added, "Do you children know what a map is?"

Rollan and Conor exchanged another dismal look.

Lady Evelyn spread a map over Tarik's sleeping chest. She pointed to a town near the top. "This is Glengavin. The rumor says that Rumfuss is near here. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, that's far north, and up there they paint their faces blue and eat foreigners."

That hadn't been what Rollan or Conor was thinking, but it sure was what they were thinking about *now*.

Lady Evelyn continued, "But the Lord of Glengavin is amicable toward the Greencloaks. He should provide a welcome, or at least no hindrance. The surroundings are quite wild and I doubt you'd be able to find it without this."

"Where are we now?" Rollan asked.

Lady Evelyn traced a line southward. "Here."

"Oh!" Conor said in a surprised, glad sort of yelp. "We're near Trunswick. It's on the way."

"What's Trunswick?" Rollan asked. "And why does it make you say 'oh!' like an overexcited pigeon?"

"It's where I used to be a servant," Conor said. "And my family works the land near there."

"You don't have time for detours, Greencloak boy," Lady Evelyn said. "Stick to the task."

Conor's face fell. "Right. Sure. Of course."

Rollan couldn't help it. He hated to see Conor looking so crestfallen. "Maybe we could still spend the night in Trunswick tomorrow. Not home, but close, right?"

Immediately Conor's face brightened. "I'm sure they'd give us a warm welcome. And my mother —"

Lady Evelyn interrupted with a vague frown. "I feel as if I have heard a rumor about Trunswick."

"Good or bad?" asked Rollan.

She tapped her remaining teeth with a stick. "Something about Greencloaks and the Devourer. Or maybe it was Trynsfield. Or Brunswick. Trunbridge? Was that the one we were talking about?"

Conor pointed to the map. "Trunswick. Right there."

She said, "Lovely place, I'm sure."

HAWKERS

THEY — FINN, MEILIN, AND ABEKE — WERE HIDING.

Along with Uraza, they were tucked between two boulders. As far as the eye could see, which wasn't very far in the darkness, there were man-sized, teeth-shaped stones pressed shoulder to shoulder. While Abeke marveled over the strangeness of the landscape and listened to the night, Meilin and Finn argued.

"Tonight is not a night to die," Finn whispered hoarsely.

Meilin's voice was cross. "I wasn't suggesting we die. I was suggesting we go back for the others."

"At this point, both of those things are the same," he muttered back.

"Shh," Abeke shushed them as quietly as she could. She jabbed a finger into the darkness.

Finn and Meilin turned to look where she pointed. Uraza was already looking, her ears swiveling to and fro. The black night kept most of its secrets, but Abeke could hear the wet

squelch of a man's footprint on stone. One of the Conquerors. Close by.

Meilin opened her mouth. Abeke held her finger to her lips.

It had taken them hours to rid themselves of the group they'd first encountered in the forest. By then they had lost track of Conor, Rollan, and Tarik, and would have lost their way as well, if not for Finn's knowledge as a guide.

The sound of the man's footsteps came closer. Uraza stiffened. Abeke felt the vibration of an inaudible growl through the leopard's ribs pressed against her. Finn stretched out a hand: *Don't move*.

Holding their breath, they listened to the man climb over the boulders near them. All he had to do was clamber over two or three more, and he would discover them and alert his allies.

The Conqueror scraped over another boulder. His breath huffed out noisily as he landed at the base of it. Abeke suspected that he wasn't truly looking for them, or he would've minded how loud he was. But then again, maybe not. Abeke was always surprised by most people's ignorance of their own noisiness. It was one of the reasons why Finn's deliberate stealth impressed her.

Suddenly the Conqueror's breath was quite near. He was on the other side of the boulder Abeke knelt behind. If there had been any light at all, she probably would have been able to see his face through the gap between the rocks.

Every muscle in Uraza's body was knitted solid.

Abeke's heart pounded so loudly in her ears that she could barely hear anything else. She pressed her fingers into Uraza's fur. Slowly, her pulse calmed. Now she heard the sound of the man's palm as he felt his way along the stone.

He was so close.

Finn closed his eyes. Strangely enough, he looked quite serene. One of his arms hugged his chest so that his fingertips could touch his upper bicep. *Is that where his spirit animal is?* Abeke wondered.

Needle-fine claws scritch on stone as the Conqueror's spirit animal joined him. Abeke heard the click of hungry jaws. Somehow, a small, hungry spirit animal seemed more terrifying than a large one in this darkness. As if you maybe wouldn't notice it until it was right on you.

Then the Conqueror's voice sounded roughly. "Come on, Tan."

His footsteps receded as he headed away with whatever sort of animal Tan was. After a very, very long silence, Finn blew out a relieved sigh. Abeke released her handful of leopard fur. Uraza's tenseness oozed from her.

Meilin turned to Finn. "Do we have a regroup point? To reconnect with Tarik and the others?"

Abeke was unsurprised to hear her sounding efficient and strategic. That girl's heart was a battlefield.

"We did," Finn said. "A local Greencloak waypoint. But we've passed it, and we'd have to risk fighting back toward it. I think we should continue on to Trunswick. Even if the

others aren't there, we can try to get a message to Greenhaven."

Abeke thought of the terrible fight in the woods and shuddered. She hoped the others were all right. "Message? How?"

"Gilded pigeons carry messages from many large towns in Eura," Finn answered. "Most Greencloaks know where to find someone who runs the birds."

I wonder if I could send a message to my family, Abeke thought.

Finn must have sensed her interest, because his expression softened and he added, "I will teach you how to send messages if it comes to that."

Meilin eyed Abeke suspiciously, but said nothing.

What? What did I do? Oh, Abeke thought dismally. *I wonder if she thinks I want to send messages to the enemy.*

She wished there was a way that she could reassure the other girl, but there didn't seem to be a way to without sounding even more suspicious. So she just said, "So we go now to Trunswick?"

"It's still quite a ways from here," Finn said. He pushed to his feet stiffly. "Let's find a place to sleep. Someplace a bit more comfortable."

By *more comfortable*, Finn meant sleeping under rocks instead of on top of them. They spent a rather brittle night beneath a rock overhang on the edge of the boulder field. It wasn't cozy, but at least it was dry and out of the wind.

Abeke and Uraza curled up together like siblings and fell asleep.



In the morning light, their surroundings looked quite different. Coming from Nilo, Abeke had never seen anything like the landscape. Behind them was the expanse of strange, square boulders, and before them was a flat, purple-green field that went on and on. Finn looked somehow at home here: All his green-purple tattoos matched the colors of the grass, and his silver hair matched the clouds that pressed low.

“Those rocks are called the Giant’s Chessboard. And this is a moor,” he explained to them. “It looks quite innocent, but it can be treacherous. The ground is soft in places and will happily swallow a person. Or a panda.”

Meilin, stretching elegantly, said, “I’ll keep Jhi in passive form today.”

“Do you think it’s safe to let Uraza walk?” Abeke asked, resting her fingers on the leopard’s shoulder blades. “She prefers to run when she can.” *Like me.*

“I think so,” Finn said. “Cats are careful. But if we see anyone coming, it would probably be best to hide her.”

“I guess there is no mistaking her for an ordinary leopard,” Abeke said. Uraza preened at the admiration in Abeke’s voice.

“Not many ordinary leopards in Eura anyway,” Finn noted. “Much less extraordinary ones.”

They set off across the moor. The ground beneath them shifted from hard-packed rocks to watery silt without warning. If Abeke hadn't been paying attention, she could've been in hidden water above her head before she had a chance to cry out.

In fact, only a few moments had passed before disaster struck. It wasn't that Abeke heard something — it was that she suddenly didn't hear something. A second later she realized that it was Meilin's breathing. She didn't hear it anymore because Meilin wasn't *there* anymore.

Abeke spun this way and that, but there was only motionless moor ahead and behind her.

"Finn!" she cried.

Finn understood immediately. "Where?"

"I don't *know*!"

They both scanned the moor for any sign of the other girl, but even Uraza couldn't pinpoint where she had gone. Abeke was too aware that every second that passed was a second Meilin couldn't breathe.

"Uraza," Finn said urgently, "any ideas?"

Nothing.

Then Meilin's arm burst into sight. It looked as if it grew from the tufted grass. Her fingers felt for the foliage, seized it. There was no way she would be able to pull herself out, but she was going to try. Leaping forward, Finn gripped her forearm with one tattooed hand. He stretched out his other hand to Abeke.

“Don’t let us both go in,” he warned. Grabbing his hand, Abeke braced herself. Then she hauled, and Finn hauled, and the moor gave Meilin up like a newborn calf. She sprawled across the grass rather unbeautifully and spat out some muddy bits of water.

“Welcome back,” Finn told Meilin, a little out of breath.

“I was doing fine,” she retorted, spitting out another glob of dirty grass.

Finn’s mouth made a crafty shape. He said, “Abeke and I will know better next time.”

Abeke hid a smile.

Meilin was already retrieving the bag she’d dropped when she’d disappeared. She seemed completely unfazed by the experience. As she took down her damp hair and shook her head, she muttered, “It is going to take *forever* for my clothing to dry in this climate.”

“I did say to be cautious,” Finn said. “Let’s use our heads.”

The image of Meilin’s hand extended from the hungry moor did keep Abeke careful for quite a bit of their journey that day. But then she began to notice how gifted Uraza was at finding dry spots to leap from. She also discovered that if she really focused on the leopard, she could sense them too. Soon the two of them were dancing across the moor.

Laughing, they outstripped the others. After a few minutes, however, Abeke and Uraza hesitated. Up ahead, Abeke got the *sense* of people. Then, a second later, she caught a glimpse of distant figures.

“Uraza!” she called. She held out her arm and the leopard vanished onto it without pause. The sting of it was more like a flush of heat now. It felt good. Powerful. Like Uraza was somehow becoming a part of her. She felt as if she could still feel the leopard beside her.

“What is it?” Meilin asked as she and Finn caught up.

Finn followed Abeke’s gaze to the approaching silhouettes. As they grew closer, Abeke could see that one of them carried a pike with a stubby red-and-white flag on it.

“I don’t like this,” he said. “I think they’re Hawkers.”

Meilin’s eyes narrowed. “What’s a Hawker?”

“They’re scoundrels who sell fake Nectar.” Finn’s voice had turned dark. “They also sell the pelts of spirit animals.”

“What?!” Abeke exclaimed. “Why?!”

Finn’s fingers rested lightly on his complex tattoos. “There is a dirty superstition that wearing the pelt of a spirit animal will give you their powers, even if you weren’t able to summon one yourself. You two *must* hide the fact that you have spirit animals or the Hawkers might be tempted to attack you.”

Meilin and Abeke wordlessly tugged their sleeves down.

As the figures approached, dragging a small cart behind them, Meilin dropped her gaze and slumped her shoulders. She was transformed immediately to a docile and shy farm girl. Abeke ducked her head hurriedly. She wasn’t sure she was as gifted an actress as Meilin, though.

“Hello, hello, hello!” said the first of the Hawkers. He had a very winning smile. It looked made out of rubber, like it

could stretch and stretch and never break. If Finn hadn't been uneasy before, Abeke probably would've trusted this newcomer.

"Fine morning to you," said the woman beside him. She also appeared friendly, though she seemed to be made out of porridge instead of rubber. All soft dimples and warmth. "On a journey with your . . . daughters? Servants?"

Abeke and Meilin shot irritated glances at each other.

Finn replied in his quiet, unaffected way, "Foster daughters."

"Oh and oh," the man said. "I hear in your voice you're from the North too."

The Hawker said it aggressively — a taunt or a dare — but Finn did not waver. "That's where we are headed. They will learn to sing for those with troubled bonds."

"A noble calling," the woman said.

"Noble," agreed the rubbery man. "Troubled bonds and troubled bonds, eh? How old are you lot? Old enough! Do you have spirit animals, little daughters?"

Meilin actually managed a blush as she turned her face away, looking too bashful to even *think* of answering. Abeke kept her head ducked and hoped they'd think she was too shy as well. She was beginning to change her mind about trusting the smiling man.

"Do you know the legend of the black wildcat?" the rubbery man asked.

Finn's mouth thinned. Meilin shook her head imperceptibly. Abeke didn't move at all.

“Going to the North and don’t know the legend of the black wildcat!” exclaimed the porridge woman. “For years, the North has had its stories of giant black cats wandering its moors. Wondrous things, these wildcats. Big as a horse. Fierce. Full of magic!”

Finn said, his voice flat, “There are no black wildcats in the North anymore.”

“Oh, you and you!” said the rubbery man. “Have faith! There’s a prophecy that says a boy will bond with the black wildcat and deliver the North from persecution and poverty! That will lead us all to a glorious, peaceful future!”

“Maybe one of you is the child of the prophecy!” the porridge woman exclaimed.

Abeke forgot to be bashful. She said, “I’m not a boy.”

The rubbery man grinned and pointed at her. “Well spotted. But we can sell you a potion that will force the bond! We don’t have to wait for the legend to come true — we can make it come true.”

Finn said, “There’s no such potion. And there is no black wildcat of the North. Not anymore.”

“Oh, that is where you are wrong, funny little man!” said the porridge woman. She grandly let the door to their small cart fall open, revealing a rainbow of bottles, books, and colorful flotsam. A caged black animal peered out. When it saw Abeke’s face, it mewled.

Meilin was unable to disguise her scorn. Her voice was anything but demure. “That’s a house cat.”

“It’s a baby black wildcat,” the rubbery man said.

"It's a full-grown house cat," Meilin insisted.

"It will get larger."

She scoffed, "I think it's plenty large enough for a house cat."

The cat stood on its back legs and pressed the small black pads of its feet against the cage bars. Abeke's heart and Uraza's tattoo stirred.

"Oh," Abeke said suddenly. "It's cruel to keep it locked up. You should set it free."

"And lose our livelihood?" the rubbery man said. "Indeed no."

Abeke burst out, "Can we buy it from you? Not to bond with, just to have. It really is only a cat."

Finn and Meilin stared at her. So did the rubbery man and the porridge woman.

"What will you buy it with?" the rubbery man asked.

Abeke had no money. They'd packed everything they needed, and anyway, back in Nilo, everything was bartered and traded for. There was no need for money.

Hesitantly, she said, "I will trade you for my bracelet. It's made of real elephant tail hair, all the way from Nilo, and it is good luck."

"Oh, Abeke," Meilin said with disgust. "It's a *cat*."

Finn said nothing, just crossed his arms.

Rubbery man and porridge woman consulted. Abeke knew it sounded crazy. She couldn't explain her affinity for the cat, but it felt a little like her bond with Uraza.

"All right and all right," agreed the rubbery man. "For the price of your good luck charm. That seems fair."

So Abeke handed over her bracelet, thinking, *I'm sorry, Soama, I hope you will understand!* The porridge woman unlocked the cage and gave the little black cat to Abeke.

As Abeke accepted it, the sleeves of her cloak slid to her elbows. For just a moment, her bare skin was exposed and her tattoo was revealed to the air. Hurriedly, Abeke shook her sleeve back down.

Maybe they didn't see it, she thought.

But she knew from the rubbery man's suddenly sharp expression that he had.

"So you *have* bonded," he said, grabbing her wrist. Every ounce of friendliness had drained from his voice.

Quick as anything, he had a knife in his hand. The knife was the opposite of his smile in every way. It was thin and unforgiving and as black as a lonely night.

And it was pointed right at Abeke.

"Produce your spirit animal," he ordered. "Or I will cut your throat."

Abeke *couldn't* give Uraza to these people, but she didn't know what else to do. Finn was motionless, his gaze fixed hypnotically on the knife. It was as if the true Finn had gone somewhere else and left just his body behind. Abeke didn't know what was wrong with him, but she knew she didn't have a chance without the help of Finn or Uraza.

Suddenly there was a blur of motion. The rubbery man released Abeke's wrist. He fell backward with a tremendous

whoof as the air was knocked out of him.

Meilin stood over him, pointing his own knife at his throat. She was glorious and fierce, loose strands of her black hair snaking around her angry face. “It’s insulting enough that you sold us a stray cat. But this is beyond insulting. Here is my bargain: Give this girl back her bracelet and I won’t cut *your* throat.”

The porridge woman started to move and Meilin threw up her other hand. With a flash of blue light, Jhi appeared. The rubbery man and the porridge woman stared, mouths agape. The little cat in Abeke’s arms clung to her neck. It was a very clawsome hug.

“*Here* is a legend,” Meilin snapped, gesturing to Jhi. The panda looked imaginary and grand in the gray-green surroundings. “The Four Fallen have returned! We will defeat the Conquerors and we will be the ones to usher in a peaceful world. I suggest you find something other than lies to sell.”

There was absolute silence.

“Jhi,” whispered the porridge woman.

Meilin gestured toward Abeke.

Abeke released Uraza in another flash of green light. The massive leopard *did* look legendary, her violet eyes ablaze.

“Uraza,” murmured the porridge woman. “Impossible.”

The rubbery man held out the bracelet. Finn took it from him without a word.

Meilin smiled sharply at the Hawkers. “Spread the word. The Great Beasts are back.”

Then she turned to Finn and Abeke. “What are we waiting for? We have work to do.”

TRUNSWICK

CONOR REALLY WAS DOING HIS BEST TO BE A GOOD PARTNER with Briggan. Sometimes it was easy. He'd grown up with sheepdogs, and Briggan could be quite doglike. He liked for Conor to toss clumps of sod for him to fetch. He played gleeful tug-of-war with vines. He always let Conor lead, to show that he trusted him to be in charge.

But sometimes he was nothing like a dog, and Conor was never sure if this was because he was acting more like a wolf specifically or acting more like a Great Beast in general. For instance, the family sheepdogs had always been eager to curl up to sleep beside Conor. But Briggan, no matter how cold the night, slept at least a few feet from him. The sheepdogs had absolutely hated to be stared at, but if Conor caught Briggan's gaze, the wolf held it unblinkingly until Conor became uncomfortable.

And he really did howl at the moon.

Conor had spent so many nights being terrified of that sound. Wondering when the wolves would appear. Wondering if he'd be able to keep them from killing any sheep. Wondering if he'd be able to keep them from killing *him*.

If he was being honest, he tried so hard with Briggan to hide the fact that he was still a little afraid of him.

"Home sweet home, eh?" Rollan asked, shielding his eyes.

They had made it to Trunswick. Finally.

The others had never made it to the tower, so Rollan and Conor had started across the fields alone. They had walked and walked and walked, jumping at the slightest noise, fearing Conquerors, dangerous animals, or Conquerors with dangerous animals. They had stopped to snatch a few nervous hours of sleep — long enough for Conor to have a fuzzy dream of both Rumfuss and a large, wild-looking hare sleeping in a patch of wisteria — and then walked some more.

Now the town rose up above them; the castle stood at the highest point of the hill. Blue-roofed houses made of sandy-colored stone crowded below it. Brilliant blue flags and banners flew from nearly every roof, as if the town were waving a frantic greeting to the boys. Conor knew that all the standards would feature Briggan, Eura's patron beast. He felt a warm flood of relief: It had been such a nerve-racking journey without either of the older Greencloaks. But

now here was familiar old Trunswick. Everything would be all right, surely.

“So this is Trunswick,” Rollan observed. “Where you have fond memories of being sold into servitude by your father?”

Conor’s cheeks heated. “I wasn’t sold.”

“Loaned, then,” Rollan corrected warmly. “Oh, don’t look so beaten up over it. My father rudely up and *died* on me, so I reckon he’s the worse parent. Oh, hey. You did say ‘a warm welcome,’ right?” He pointed toward the town. “Did you mean warm like ‘burning’?”

A plume of smoke rose from the opposite side of the town. Vaguely uneasy, Conor said, “Sometimes the farmers burn their fields to kill the thistles and heather. Come on, we’ll go in a side way.”

A sandy-colored wall that matched the sandy-colored houses surrounded Trunswick. There were several unguarded gates. The main gate was always crowded, so Conor led them toward the nearly hidden one nearest to the castle. He paused, tipping his head back.

Two blue flags flew over the gate, just like before. But unlike before, Briggan’s silhouette was missing. In its place was the outline of a bulky black cat. The change was so absolutely unexpected and so *wrong* that Conor couldn’t immediately process the truth of it.

Slowly, he asked Rollan, “Am I awake?”

“Is this a trick question?”

Conor had grown up under the image of a gray wolf on a blue field. Briggan’s iconic image had flown over every state

event. Every family had a wolf figure on their mantel or a howling wolf carved into the wood above the doorway.

Briggan was Eura.

But now there was a blue flag with a wildcat flying over the gate.

It seemed like it should be a dream. Or a hallucination.

Rollan had noticed Conor's goggling at the flag, so Conor stammered, "That's supposed to be Briggan."

"What? The cat? Looks a little like Uraza."

This cat was far more muscled than Abeke's leopard, but Conor saw the resemblance. If he hadn't known any better, he would've thought it was supposed to be the silly wildcat from the children's stories he'd grown up with. Hadn't every child in Eura heard about the hero who would rise up with a black cat? It had been an inspiring sort of myth.

But Trunswick didn't need a myth. They had Briggan. He was back. He was real.

Before Conor had time to wonder about this out loud, a huge mastiff burst from the other side of the entrance. It bayed, jowls slobbery. The noise rumbled in their feet. Its threatening bark called out a second dog. Conor knew these were no ordinary hounds. The Trunswicks' mastiffs were infamous for their fight-to-the-death training. It wasn't their bite that was deadly, although it was formidable. It was their *hold*. The mastiffs were trained to find a grip on their victims' throats and not let go until a Trunswick guard gave the order.

"Brace yourself," Conor warned.

"I don't get along with dogs," Rollan muttered, reaching toward the dagger he wore by his side. Briggan's ears pinned and his tail dropped.

But the mastiffs merely circled and pushed them forward. This wasn't an attack. It was an escort.

"Spirit animals?" Conor asked Rollan.

"Slobber animals," Rollan replied, holding his hands out of the way of their drooling mouths. "What's going on? Is this slimy greeting usual?"

Before Conor could reply, a guard shouted at them from his post at the gate. "Hey, you!" The mastiffs herded the two boys closer. A few feet away, Conor saw that the guard wore a blue Trunswick surcoat over his chain mail. But, as on the flag, the wolf insignia had been replaced with a black wildcat. Behind him, another three mastiffs emerged. The guard tugged Conor's cloak, rubbing mud off between his thumb and forefinger and revealing the color beneath. "Greencloaks!" The contempt in his voice when he said the word was as shocking as anything else that had happened. "You can come quietly to the prison, or you can make this difficult."

Of all the ways Conor had imagined this day would go, this had not been one of them.

Rollan said, "Keep your shirt on, old man. We haven't done anything wrong."

Stunned, Conor stammered, "Please. I'm not a stranger. I used to be Devin Trunswick's servant. I — I lived here."

How foolish he felt. Just a bumbling shepherd facing these castle guards, unable to explain himself.

“Quietly,” the guard repeated. A few people had gathered behind him, anticipating drama. “Or difficult?” As he moved toward them, Briggan let loose a rippling snarl.

“No, Briggan,” Conor said. There were five of the dogs and only one Briggan. Although Briggan was superior in most ways to each dog, if one of the mastiffs got him by the throat, he’d be powerless against the other four. “We’re not here to fight.”

He felt Rollan’s attention on him, waiting for him to somehow sort this out; this was his hometown after all. But this was no Trunswick Conor knew. Not with that strange animal on the blue flag. Not with this guard, this strangely bloodthirsty crowd, these mastiffs.

A familiar voice rang out. “What’s the commotion?”

Inside the gate, people and animals parted for the newcomer. An animal led the way: a large black cat, waist-tall. Its eyes were golden and its pelt was silky, inky black with even blacker spots that showed in the sun.

A black panther.

As it stalked dangerously down the cobblestones, a boy stepped out behind it.

Devin Trunswick.

His posture was even haughtier than before. His clothing was impeccable. Everything about him shouted that he was a lord’s son. Conor felt so foolish for thinking anything might have changed between them because of Briggan.

How ridiculous, Conor thought. I'm still a shepherd's son and he's still a noble. We won't ever be equal.

Devin's eyes found Conor's and held them. He seemed to be thinking the same thing.

Devin held out his arm. Without a second's pause, the panther vanished. A tattoo appeared on Devin's arm.

Conor inhaled audibly.

Impossible. It was absolutely impossible. Conor had been at the Nectar Ceremony where Devin had failed to call up a spirit animal. He had been standing right beside him. Close enough to see the disappointment painted on his mouth.

His mother hadn't mentioned this in her letter. Conor's pulse fluttered.

Where is my mother?

"Devin!" he called, trying to cover his surprise. "It's me, Conor."

Devin said, "I know." Then he called to the guards, cool and imperious, "What are you waiting for? *Seize them!*"

Rollan grabbed Conor's elbow. Together they jumped away. One of the guards snatched at Conor, but he rolled out of the way. Briggan snapped at the mastiffs. They were stronger, but slower. And there was absolutely no reason to engage them: they had no purpose here in Trunswick. Conor knew these streets. If he could get to the smaller alleys, he might be able to lead Rollan and Briggan out of danger.

He ran down an alley. Beside him, Briggan jumped on top of crates, his powerful hind legs sending them crashing behind him. Essix coursed overhead, her shadow shrinking

and growing as she ducked beneath clotheslines and over jutting roofs.

A girl shouted out a window, “*Run, Greencloaks!*”

Conor barely had time to look up before the girl’s mother dragged her inside and clapped the window closed. The mother’s expression was frightened.

Farther ahead, more windows opened. A boy and a girl waved at Conor, and then, just after Conor and Rollan had passed, they tipped buckets of scalding-hot water into the alleyway. The pursuing guards yelled in pain. Steam curled up the walls. The children were helping Conor and Rollan escape.

Conor had no breath to thank them, but he waved and hoped they understood.

“I’ll remember that!” one of the guards shouted at the windows, his hand clapped over his scalded face. Conor and Rollan left them behind, not slowing. Conor knew that there was a hidden weakness in the wall nearby. If they could just make it there, they could leave Trunswick behind and escape across the moors.

But as Conor darted down a side street, a huge lizard — as long as Briggan — suddenly loomed from the darkness. Its face and clawed feet were black, but the rest of its bumpy hide was a checkerboard of orange and black. Everything about it looked poisonous. It hissed like something out of a nightmare. Conor scrabbled in the other direction. Behind him he heard snarls and cries. He couldn’t see Briggan or Rollan. It felt like there were walls and people

everywhere — an older girl with a flat frog in her hands, another girl with the giant lizard, and Devin with his leering smile.

As he spun, Conor was brought up short by a fourth person: a tall, dark-skinned boy and his spirit animal, a long-legged chestnut bird with a big, stork-like head. The bird was tall enough to look right into his eyes. Possibly it was adrenaline, but the hair on Conor's arms felt charged, like when lightning had struck very close.

"I'd suggest giving in," the boy said. "My hammerkop here has a very short temper."

"Also," added the girl holding the flat frog, "because we have your spirit animal."

The mastiffs had pinned Briggan to the ground. Conor's heart sank when he saw that one of them had bracketed its jaws loosely around Briggan's windpipe. The wolf's eyes flashed, full of rebellion, but he had no choice but to submit.

"Also also," Devin said, "we have this one. His cloak seems slightly less green than yours."

He pointed to Rollan, who squirmed and thrashed in a guard's hands. Behind them, a tall, handsome man in a richly embroidered cloak watched the proceedings with an approving smile.

"Two little piggies," the man said. "And one not-so-big, not-so-bad wolf."

Rollan sneered and spat at him.

The man seemed unconcerned. If anything, Rollan's rage pleased him. "You had your chance to choose sides, Rollan.

We both see you chose poorly.”

This man knew Rollan? Conor tried to place him. Was he from the castle? A guard?

No.

His mind returned to the mountains of Amaya, where Barlow, their ally, their *friend*, had been slain — stabbed through the back while saving Abeke’s life.

This was Zerif.

A Conqueror.

We’ve delivered ourselves to the enemy, Conor thought, cursing himself. *All because I wanted to come back here. Why? This isn’t home. This place has always been a trap. All because I wanted to return to a place where I’d always been trapped. Now I’m trapped all over again.*

He couldn’t explain to Rollan how sorry he was.

The crowd parted for the earl himself. He looked exactly like his son Devin, only he had a pointy, neatly trimmed beard. He surveyed them coldly. “Put them both in the Howling House. We’ll decide what to do with them later.” To Conor and Rollan he said, “Place your spirit animals in passive form now.”

“Yeah,” Devin agreed. “It’d be too bad if we had to hurt a Great Beast.” His nasty smile indicated he didn’t think it would be too bad at all.

“Wait,” Rollan snapped. “What are we being imprisoned for?”

“We’ve done nothing,” Conor said. He unsuccessfully searched the earl’s face for any trace of compassion. “And

you know I'm not a stranger to Trunswick."

The earl barely glanced at them. It was obvious he didn't find Rollan or Conor worthy enough to get the full attention he'd give a *proper* enemy. He said, "The cloak you wear here condemns you, boy. Trunswick has had enough of the Greencloaks' iron rule. We're weary of all their talk of Erdas's destiny." He lifted a lazy hand toward a blue flag bearing the wildcat. "Erdas, indeed. All this talk of our destiny. Trunswick will make its own destiny."

Conor protested, "My lord, we only came to —"

The earl held up his hand as if he were calming a dog. "Please be quiet. I will no longer tolerate hearing the voices of the likes of you."

The likes of you.

His voice oozed dismissal.

It was like a slap. Conor had not been hit, but he felt the same urge to sink to his knees. The same rush of blood to his cheeks. The same thud of his heart in his rib cage.

Devin was trying very hard to hide a smile. Zerif nodded approvingly. As if he was so pleased the earl had finally stopped letting those Greencloaks push him around.

The earl turned to the guard beside him. "If the boy won't put his animal into passive form, have the dogs kill it and burn the body with the rest."

Rollan's eyes widened, his cool facade dropping.

Conor wordlessly stretched his hand toward where Briggan was pinned to the ground. The wolf immediately vanished from beneath the mastiffs and appeared on

Conor's arm. Rollan, however, had no such success. With a scowl, he called to Essix. But the falcon flew high overhead in ever wider circles. Every so often the bird looked down so that it was clear she was listening, just not obeying.

Devin and the girl with the frog snickered. Zerif yawned. It was a glorious yawn, his hand elegantly covering his mouth and his laugh at once. Behind them, Conor could see Devin's little brother, Dawson, averting his eyes. He'd always been the best one in the family. It was hard to imagine him taking any joy in this horrible scene, but he was too young to help now.

"The boy's bond is weak," the earl said. "So the bird's no threat anyway. Just leave it and lock the others up."

"Welcome home, shepherd," Devin sneered.

THE HOWLING HOUSE

IT DIDN'T TAKE ESSIX LONG TO FIND MEILIN, ABEKE, AND FINN. They were just climbing a grassy bank that afforded a view of Trunswick when Finn spotted the falcon circling. He waved one arm, and then two. Abeke and Meilin joined in. Essix wheeled toward them.

"It's Essix. Does that mean something's happened to Rollan?" Meilin asked. The thought annoyed her. If someone was going to hurt that boy, she wanted it to be *her*.

"Essix doesn't seem alarmed enough for him to be dead," Finn said. Abeke winced, but Meilin appreciated that Finn didn't try to sugarcoat the possibilities for them. Lives were at stake. It would do them all well to remember that.

Finn shielded his eyes to better see the falcon. "But she seems agitated. It's hard to say if Rollan sent her to us or if she's come on her own accord. Do you see a message tied to her leg?"

"Nothing," Meilin verified.

“Are they in Trunswick?” Finn called up to Essix. The bird shrieked back, three times.

Meilin said, “I think that means yes.”

Finn asked the falcon, “Should we meet up with them right now?”

Essix cried out once. It was an angry, ferocious bark of a sound. Quite clearly: no.

“Imprisoned, I would guess,” Finn said. “Or working secretly to get information. Either way, we’ll have to be cautious.”

Meilin considered. She touched the tattoo where Jhi waited in passive form. It wasn’t nearly as effective as the meditation sessions, but the gesture reminded her of that clarity of thought. She asked, “Should we circle the town to see if we can learn any more?”

Finn nodded. “Probably a wise idea. I shouldn’t really go marching into town without some strategy anyway. The Earl of Trunswick and I had a disagreement not too long ago.”

“What sort of disagreement?” Meilin demanded.

Finn narrowed his eyes in the direction of the castle. “He tried to kill me.”

That seemed like a valid reason to avoid going into town.

“In any case, it would be advantageous to have a plan,” he added.

Abeke made a little pained noise. At first Meilin thought it was because of worry, but then she saw no — it was because the Hawkers’ ridiculous black cat thought Essix was going to eat her. The cat had affixed its claws rather

securely into Abeke's hair. It looked as if the animal was actually growing directly from the other girl's head.

"You could let that cat down," Meilin said scathingly. "You wanted to free her, and now she's free."

Abeke tried to remove the cat from her head. Reams of her own hair stretched from her scalp to the cat.

"She's scared," insisted Abeke, still tugging. The cat let out a rattling wail that oscillated in time with the tugs. "She won't slow us down."

Meilin narrowed her eyes, but it was hard to argue. Abeke had been seeming a little more feline lately, more like Uraza. Maybe this was part of it. "Good. Keep it that way. The others need us, whether or not they're in immediate trouble. The sooner we find out more and meet back up with them, the sooner we can get to Rumfuss. Now, let's get out of here, unless you *want* the Conquerors to catch us."

Before Meilin could stop herself, the insinuation slipped out — the prospect that Abeke might not mind the Conquerors finding them at all, since she might still be working for them. Finn leveled a very heavy look at her. Tarik or Olvan would have probably scolded her for talking to Abeke like that, but she thought they also would have understood why deep down, Meilin still didn't trust Abeke. And it was hard to be very kind to someone she didn't trust, now more than ever.

But Finn simply turned away and, under his breath, said something only Meilin could hear. "Trust must be practiced."

Meilin wanted to roll her eyes and ignore him, but his words — and his quiet disapproval — rankled her. Somewhere along the way, she had started wanting to impress him. This annoyed her for reasons she couldn't quite find words for. Why should she care for the respect of a man who wouldn't even lift a sword to save himself at that forest battle?

But he had led them across the Giant's Chessboard and the moor, and had pulled her from the waste. And without his advice in the Moon Tower, she would have never learned about Jhi's problem-solving abilities.

What is a warrior's heart? she wondered. *Does it always carry a sword?*

Grudgingly, she said out loud, "Abeke, I'm sorry if . . . my words seemed harsh. I didn't mean them that way."

Abeke's eyebrows shot up. She appeared so surprised by this miserly kindness. Was it possible Meilin had been a little too uncaring the past several days? Just because she sometimes doubted Abeke's loyalties didn't mean she had to be so cruel about it.

Finn looked over his shoulder.

He didn't say anything. Not a word. But he nodded, and Meilin's heart felt lighter.

They climbed over the bank, down toward Trunswick, keeping enough distance to avoid attracting any unwanted attention. Meilin searched the town's appearance for any clues as to what kind of place this could be and what their friends could be up to inside it. The town's structure was

straightforward: castle crowning the hill, buildings huddled around it. It stank of beeswax smoke, coal, and the peculiar scent of horse hooves, so Meilin could tell already that it had more than its fair share of blacksmiths. The blue flags that flew from nearly every roof flapped listlessly, made of heavy wool rather than the silk and linen flags that Meilin had grown up under. The entire town seemed crude and disheveled in comparison to Zhong's elegant cities, and Meilin felt a pang in her heart.

She pushed it down.

No time for weakness or second-guessing her decision to stay now.

"Ah, Trunswick," said Finn. His voice had gone a little flat. It was a bit like his face had gone when the Hawker had brandished the knife.

"What is that over there?" Meilin asked. Over a nearby knot of trees, a patch of sky was dark with smoke.

Lifting her chin, Abeke sniffed the air. "I think it's a bonfire. It's not just wood they are burning, anyway. Do you smell it?"

Abeke was right. There was something a little off about the odor of the fire. Something a little unpleasant that made her feel anxious.

Zhong, burning . . . She pushed the thought away as her eyes stung.

Finn interrupted her thoughts by saying, "It doesn't feel like a good sign."

“Finn . . . I think Essix is trying to tell us something,” Abeke said. She pointed in the other direction, toward Trunswick. Or rather, since she was holding the cat with both hands, she pointed with the cat to where Essix circled over a large building partway up the hill. “Do you think the others are in that building?”

“It would be bad luck if they were,” Finn said. “That’s the Howling House. It’s where they keep people and animals who bonded without Nectar, and developed the bonding sickness. Well, one sort of bonding sickness — it’s for those who went mad. It’s part hospital and part prison.”

Meilin’s mind turned over his words: *those who went mad*. She had heard of the bonding sickness, of course. Everyone learned about the dangers of bonding without the Nectar. In the days before Nectar, some bonds went well, and other bonds didn’t. Human and animal were tied to each other, and yet couldn’t connect. Sleepless nights piled one upon the other. Some were able to work through it on their own, or learned to live with the difficult bond. But others, as Finn noted, went mad.

This was why even the most remote village in Zhong had a designated authority to notify the Greencloaks when a child came of age. It was hard to imagine anyone bonding without Nectar these days — harder still to imagine enough difficult bonds to warrant an entire prison.

Meilin asked, “You think they’re being kept prisoner there?”

"It is the only place that would hold them and their spirit animals, yes. Everything inside that building is reinforced to prevent spirit animals from escaping."

Meilin said, "How do you know so much about that place?"

Finn didn't answer. He'd gone all quiet and faraway again. Suddenly she remembered what he had said in the Moon Tower. He had bonded to Donn without the Nectar. What had he called his bond? *Difficult*.

Difficult enough to be locked up in the Earl of Trunswick's house for insane humans and animals?

Difficult enough that the Earl of Trunswick might have tried to kill him?

"So now what?" Abeke demanded.

All three of them looked toward the sun in the sky.

Finn said, "We wait."

He held out his arm, and Essix coasted smoothly down to land heavily on it. Abeke settled to the ground, opened her bag, and pulled out some jerky to munch on. They all seemed content to wait.

Waiting was Meilin's least favorite thing.



Trunswick was a silent place after dark. When night fell, Abeke, Meilin, and Finn crept closer to town. Unlike the cities of Zhong, which were lit and beautiful even at night, Trunswick was nearly as black as the moor. Only a few lanterns illuminated the main street up to the castle. There

were no candles in any of the windows. No voices rose from the bars and no stragglers moved through the streets. Even Trunswick's famous and industrious blacksmiths completely disappeared as night fell, leaving behind only a few glowing embers in their forges. Guards stood in vigilant silence at each of the gates.

Finn whispered, "There's something very wrong with this town."

Meilin, Finn, and Abeke crouched around the back of the wall. There were no gates here; no one to see them. But that meant there were no easy entrances either. In a low voice, Abeke asked Uraza, "Can you find us a weakness in the wall?"

The leopard galloped away, low and silky. She returned a few minutes later to lead them to a bricked-up gate. Some of the barrier had crumbled, leaving an opening just large enough for a person to crawl through.

Meilin kept Jhi in passive form. The gap was *not* large enough for a giant panda.

On the inside of the wall, the soundless nature of the town was even more pronounced. Meilin was very aware of their footfalls on the uneven cobblestones as Finn led the way up the narrow roads toward the Howling House. Uraza trailed behind, ears swiveling as she listened for threats. Overhead, Essix's dark form flitted from roof to roof, confirming they were headed in the right direction.

At the Howling House, torches blazed, their fiery reflections thrashing in the puddles of last night's rain. Out

front, guards moved restlessly. At least three large mastiffs lay just inside the door. It was a hive of activity in comparison to the quiet town.

“This seems impossible!” Meilin whispered to Finn.

“Patience,” he whispered back.

Meilin wasn’t very fond of patience.

Abeke whispered to Uraza, and the two of them danced quietly through the shadows, finding an invisible path around the side of the fortified barn. The leopard led them to a hiding space in a blacksmith’s shop directly across the narrow road from the Howling House. It was full of the things one would expect to find in a smith’s shop — anvil, furnace, wrought iron firedogs for holding wood — but was also cluttered with cabinetry and farming equipment.

In the smith’s, Abeke crouched behind a half-built cabinet. Finn took a place behind a large harrow. Meilin hid beside the still-warm forge. The blacksmith was on the higher side of the road, and from their hiding places they had a clear view into one of the only rooms with a normal-sized window. Inside, there were five people eating a not insubstantial meal. One very handsome, oily man and four kids.

The last time Meilin had seen the man with his tidy beard and expensive clothing, he had been stabbing one of her allies in the back during the battle for the last talisman. Just the sight of him placing a spoon in his mouth was enough to close off her throat for a moment. She barely checked her first impulse, which was to leap across the road and engage him in combat on the spot.

“Zerif,” Meilin and Abeke snarled at the same time. Their voices were equally harsh, which surprised Meilin. She still didn’t trust Abeke, but her rage at Zerif sounded genuine. Uraza’s tail thrashed at the abrasive tone.

Finn said, “I’ll stand watch here. You two go listen.”

Abeke handed Finn the cat and Meilin shook her head with annoyance.

“What are you planning to do with that thing anyway?” she demanded. “Throw it at Rumfuss?”

But Abeke merely smiled, cool and catlike, before following Meilin to the window. The voices inside were mumbled, but audible.

“Don’t be foolish,” Zerif was saying in between bites of dinner. Meilin was disgusted to watch him eat — not because he wasn’t careful, but because of the opposite. For some reason the care he took to place each bite in his mouth and then wipe his lips infuriated her. *How dare he eat like there is nothing wrong in the world. How dare he wipe his beard clean as if it matters if he is handsome!*

“No one will care about the Great Beasts when we’re done,” he continued. “Did you see any of the townsfolk caring a whit for Briggan today? They only had eyes for Elda.”

Devin preened as he admired his wildcat tattoo. “She is everything the people want.”

“That’s what I am telling you children,” Zerif said. The older blond girl with the flat frog looked rather annoyed at the word *children*. “For decades, the Greencloaks lured in

most people with their talk of Erdas's Great Beasts. By making every village everywhere reliant on the Greencloaks and the Nectar, they denied the power every country already has. Briggan serves no one but Briggan! But you, Devin. You serve Eura with their black wildcat. And you, Tahlia, serve your people with Tiddalik, Stetriol's beloved water-holding frog. Ana, with Amaya's glorious and fearful gila monster, Ix. And of course Karmo with Impundulu, Nilo's lightning bird. How long have your people been waiting for these legends to release them from hardship? Now they don't have to wait for the future. We *make* the future."

Devin nodded enthusiastically as Meilin silently fumed.

"How long do we have to deal with people like *them*, then?" demanded Karmo, jerking his chin toward the interior of the barn. He was a handsome, dark-skinned boy already as tall as Zerif. "As long as we battle the Greencloaks, we are distracted from our true purpose of aiding our people."

People like them. Meilin was sure he must mean Rollan, Conor, and Tarik.

"Once we get the talismans, they will be powerless to stand against us," Zerif said. He was briefly distracted by his reflection in the spoon. He admired it.

Tahlia looked vexed. "Just how can you be so certain? There are four other *children* with Great Beasts out there, looking for the *exact* same thing as us."

"Two," corrected Devin with a smirk. "These two we already have aren't getting out any time soon. My father built the Howling House to be the best."

Abeke and Meilin shot each other a look. Two? Who was missing?

“And I chose all of *you* to be the best,” Zerif said. “The four returned Great Beasts were summoned at random to rather unworthy human partners, as I think you saw earlier today. Each of you, on the other hand, was handpicked to be a hero. Excellent breeding —” He smiled at Devin.

“Exceptional intelligence —” He pointed his spoon at Tahlia.

“Exceeding connections —” This was directed to the girl with the lizard. “And exacerbating strength,” he said to Karmo.

The table was quiet, probably because none of them knew what *exacerbating* meant, including Zerif.

“With the Bile,” Zerif continued, “we can create even more worthy heroes. It creates bonds even when the Nectar fails. And the bonds are superior. The human has complete control! We choose the animal! No follower of the Reptile King needs to worry about bonding with a field mouse. Long live the Reptile King!”

The table was quiet again, and the faces of the children indicated that they had heard Zerif give this speech before.

Finally, he cleared his throat, moved his plate, and produced a piece of parchment. “Here’s the map we got from the two urchins. Devin, you and Karmo will use this to follow them to their destination. Get the talisman. I will come find you.”

Karmo said dubiously, “You are not joining us?”

“Karmo,” Zerif said. He stood and draped an arm across the tall boy’s shoulders. “Karmo, Karmo, Karmo. Now that the first stage of your training is done, it’s time for me to return Tahlia to Stetriol and Ana to Amaya, where they can begin to inspire their people. Devin remains here in Eura where he is most influential. And you, as we’ve discussed, have more work that you can do on Nilo’s behalf before you go home as a hero. There are two of you. Two of them. I think we can all agree that Elda and Impundulu are more than a match for that panda, even with Uraza helping her.”

Meilin gritted her teeth. There was no point in staying any longer. Punching Abeke’s arm lightly, she indicated for the other girl to follow.

When they returned to Finn, Meilin said grimly, “They’re definitely Conquerors, handpicked by Zerif. He says they have some sort of version of Nectar that can *force* a bond. And they have Rollan and Conor there in the Howling House.”

Finn’s expression went very dark. He said, “At Greenhaven, we had heard rumors. . . . There’s no time to spare. We have to get the others out. What we need is a diversion. Havoc. So they don’t have time to attack us.”

Meilin felt an idea prickle. She whispered, “Keep a lookout. I need to have a moment of silence.”

She released Jhi from her dormant state. The panda was dreadfully conspicuous in the dark. Not the black bits, of course. But everything white. And the blacksmith shop was

not designed to fit a panda. Jhi shifted her weight so that the anvil would stop poking her in the flank.

Meilin asked, “Jhi, will you help me? I think I have an idea, but I need to focus.”

The panda actually looked happy to be asked — ears pricked forward, eyes brighter, mouth less tense. Meilin hadn’t realized before that Jhi’s face was capable of holding such expression.

The moment Meilin closed her eyes, the panda’s calming influence washed over her.

It would be easy to fall asleep, she thought. She could curl up in the panda’s soft fur right here. Suddenly she missed Zhong so badly that she could cry.

This was all part of the panda’s power, she knew. Pushing down all her logical barriers. She didn’t have time for it. Focusing, she shoved away the emotion.

Choices swirled into view. This time they were more like stars than planets: bright and hard to look at directly. When Meilin considered some of them — causing a commotion with the mastiffs, sneaking in another window, attacking the guards directly — they fizzled and died out.

But one choice stayed bright. Meilin let it circle her as she studied it from all sides, looking for dull areas or weakness.

This idea isn’t an easy one, she thought.

Jhi’s encouragement washed over her. Of course she was right. Meilin had never needed the easy way.

She opened her eyes.

“Well?” Abeke asked.

Meilin said, "I'm going to need you to cover for me. This idea is going to take a bit of time."

ESCAPE

“WELL, THIS IS BRILLIANT,” ROLLAN SAID. “EVERYTHING I imagined our second mission would be.”

Their captors had taken all their things and thrown them in a stall in the Howling House, fifteen feet wide and fifteen feet long, with bars and fine wire over a single, tiny window high up on the wall. The stone floor was covered with claw marks. Deep ones. Some of them were at the edges, like an animal had tried to dig itself out. But some of them were randomly gouged into the middle of the wall. Like the animal was just angry. Or crazy.

Conor was halfway to crazy himself after being in the stall for only an hour. He didn't do well being contained. All he could think about was how wrong Trunswick seemed, and how he didn't know if his mother was trapped here — or even if she was still alive. He couldn't be sure of anything in a world where he was thrown into prison on sight.

Rollan lolled on the opposite wall, scruffy and indolent, picking his teeth with a piece of straw. He looked rather at home here in prison. But Conor was beginning to realize that Rollan worked very hard on looking at home anywhere.

"I just don't understand how Devin has a spirit animal," Conor said. "I was there, Rollan. I saw him at the Nectar Ceremony. There was no trick."

Rollan mused, "Did you see how tight he and the spirit animal were? They were the best of friends. It did just what he asked. I mean, why would it do that? Clearly it's not because of Devin's dazzling personality."

In between this line of thinking and remembering the encounter with the Trunswicks earlier, Conor suddenly felt awfully tired . . . and an awful lot like a shepherd's son. "Look, Rollan. I'm sorry. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for me."

The other boy wordlessly lifted an eyebrow.

"It wasn't that it was ever home," Conor confessed. "Home was the fields. But . . . it was different, at least, before. My mother sent me a letter and said she was working here now that I was gone, and that things weren't going so well. I just wanted to see her, see how bad things were. And I thought it would make her proud to see . . ."

He trailed off. He didn't want to think about where his mother might be. His heart felt as low as it could go.

"We all make mistakes," Rollan said. "For instance, that laundry I ate last night. That was a mistake. I can still taste it."

Conor sighed. At least he had apologized. It didn't make him feel much better, though. He knew only weakness had brought him here. Why in the world would someone like him have summoned Briggan? What a waste.

"You're driving me crazy with the pacing," Rollan said. He frowned. "Did you just hear something?"

Conor listened. He heard the sounds of animals moving in the stall next door, and night birds cooing outside, and the sound of his own breathing. "What sort of something?"

Rollan cocked his head. "A screaming sort of something?"

They both listened.

Outside, a thin shout pierced the quiet. Then another. Then a higher scream, far away.

"Yep," said Rollan. "See, screaming. I'd recognize that sound anywhere. I'm a bit of a connoisseur of it. That, to me, sounds like high-quality surprise right there."

They both jumped as something struck the fine wire of the window. It was Essix, perched precariously on the ledge. She dragged her talons across the wire.

"She's trying to get in!" Conor exclaimed.

"Sadly, that's not going to happen, my friend," Rollan told Essix, who cried thinly.

Outside, the shouts grew more numerous. They were followed by a peculiar crashing noise that Conor couldn't quite place.

Suddenly Finn was at the door, a small square of his face visible through the wire-covered view hole by the latch. He worked busily at the lock.

“Finn!” Conor said happily.

“Get ready,” Finn warned. His fingers trembled as he worked at the lock, but his voice was steady. “You might have to fight your way out.”

Rollan yipped in surprise. Water pooled around his feet.

Alarmed, Conor lifted a damp boot from the ground.

“Where’s that water coming from?”

“The water tower,” Finn said. He kept digging at the lock. His hands kept trembling, but the rest of him stayed steady. Voices rose outside.

“What’s that sound?” Conor asked.

“Greencloaks, and their supporters,” Finn replied. He kicked the lock angrily. “The earl’s locked up dozens of people who spoke out for the Greencloaks.”

Rollan joined Conor at the door. “What’s wrong with your hands?”

Finn’s eyes cut up to Rollan. “Nothing.”

Rollan’s eyes narrowed as if he knew there was more to the story, but he just asked, “What’s wrong with the lock?”

“It’s jammed somehow,” Finn said. He pulled on the door, hard. It jumped on its hinges but didn’t give way. “I need more force. Can you push from the inside?”

Conor and Rollan threw their shoulders against the wood. The door jumped unsuccessfully. They couldn’t push hard enough. There was shouting from not very far away.

“Are the other locks like this?” Conor asked.

“No. It’s only this one that seems jammed! I’ve unlocked it, but the bolt won’t give.”

“Then free the others,” Conor said. “Maybe they can help hold off the guards. We’ll keep pushing. Go!”

Finn hesitated. “I’ll come back when I’m done if you haven’t escaped yet.”

As he hurried away, Conor and Rollan tried the door again. Water wicked up their legs. Straw floated on the water seeping through the walls and under the door.

“How much water can there be in that tower?” growled Rollan through gritted teeth.

“How *stuck* can this door be?” Conor said. “They just put us in here! If we just had a bit more weight —”

A voice came through the door. “You *do*. Release Briggan!”

“Meilin!” both boys said at once.

Her angular eye appeared in the opening. What was visible of her hair was soaking wet. She said, “Trust you two to need to get rescued! Conor, why are you just standing there? I said, release Briggan! Hurry up. Where’s Tarik?”

“It’s a long story. He’s safe, but not here. Meilin, the guards —” Conor started.

“They’re busy for the moment. I’ve knocked over the water tower.”

“Knocked it over!” Rollan said, shocked. “It’s not a *goblet*. You can’t just *knock it over*.”

“Well, I did. Conor!”

With a flash, Conor released Briggan. The wolf instantly appeared beside him. He lifted his damp paws with distaste.

“Can you help, Briggan?” Conor asked. “You’re heavy!”

Without hesitation, the wolf jumped up onto the door. His weight hit it just as Meilin pulled on her side. Conor and Rollan hurled themselves against it as well. Meilin groaned. Briggan groaned. The boys groaned. The door groaned too. And then it fell open.

"That's it!" Conor clapped his hands on either side of the wolf's muzzle. The wolf let out a thrilled, resonant cry.

"All right, all right," Rollan said. "Enough of the happy reunion."

They splashed down the dim corridor after Meilin. Half of the torches had been extinguished in the commotion.

Rollan's voice was tinged with awe as he asked, "How did you knock over the water tower?"

Meilin glanced over her shoulder. Without a hint of a smile, she replied, "I had tutors for it, back in Zhong."

The three of them suddenly grinned at each other, relieved that they were back together again, even if they weren't out of trouble.

"Prepare yourselves," Meilin added at the end of the corridor. "It's wild out there."

Outside, the courtyard was lit erratically by fretful torchlight. Trunswick guards fought with over a dozen people without uniforms — the former prisoners of the Howling House. Spirit animals skirmished and galloped around the edges of the yard. Mastiffs milled underfoot.

Briggan pressed up against the back of Conor's leg, pushing him outside, and Conor thought: *This is madness.*

Finn and another man ran up to them. Even in the dim light, Conor could see that the other man was tattered and haggard. Conor had been imprisoned for just a few hours. It was clear the other man's imprisonment had lasted much longer.

"Hurry," Finn urged. "Follow me! They can't cover us long."

"Cover us?" Conor echoed. His eyes roamed over the fighting. "We have to help!"

The haggard man shook his head. "No. Briggan and the others must escape from here. You are meant for more than this."

Just then, one of the mastiffs jumped, lurching heavily into the haggard man's side. As he turned to face it, another savagely bared its slobbery teeth before lunging for his neck. Meilin immediately turned to help him, but Finn seized her arm.

"You heard what he wanted. Don't make him fight for nothing," he snapped. "Our goal is the talisman. Their goal is to allow us to pursue that goal."

Another man ran up to attack the mastiffs. But the haggard man didn't get back up.

"They want you out of here," Finn hissed, dragging Meilin away. "I'm getting you out of here. I said *follow me*."

It felt wrong to leave the Greencloak supporters behind, even if they wanted the Four Fallen to escape.

This is wrong, Conor thought. If we're so important, why can't we make a difference now? What makes us any better

than these men and women?

As they threaded through the fighting, Meilin blocked blows and Rollan ducked under swinging staffs. Everything smelled like burning wood and sweat. A rabbit bounded by them. A small bear clawed on another side. Conor realized that these must be the spirit animals of the captured Greencloaks and their supporters from the Howling House. Individually, the animals wanted to help. But as a group, they had no plan or order. It wasn't like Conor and the others — at least they'd had some training to work together.

If only they'd had a way to formulate a plan before all of this, Conor thought.

Just then, a guard dragged Conor to a stop by his cloak. Conor jerked and tugged, but the guard kept pulling him closer. Conor's boots skidded across the dirt courtyard. He was much smaller than his assailant.

"Rollan! Meilin!" he shouted. But the commotion drowned out his voice. The others hadn't even noticed that he'd been apprehended.

The guard flipped out a stubby, sharp sword. The look on his face was branded in Conor's mind.

This was not a training exercise.

This man was about to kill him.

But I'm just a boy, Conor thought.

There was no trace of mercy in the guard's eyes.

"Briggan!" Conor cried out desperately.

The wolf pivoted. But he was too far away —

A woman struck the guard with a soaked piece of wood. For a bare moment, his expression didn't change. His sword was still poised over Conor. But then the guard's eyes went blank and he slumped to his knees.

All of the breath escaped from Conor's lungs.

The woman with the piece of wood threw her arms around Conor and dragged him to her in a hug.

"Conor!" she said. Her voice was so familiar. As Briggan bounded breathlessly to Conor's side, Conor got a good look at his savior's face. His mother!

Like all the prisoners, she was tattered and careworn, but her appearance couldn't get in the way of Conor's relief. She was alive.

"Mother!" He hugged her tightly. His head was a clutter of images: that man's face as he prepared to kill Conor, the Greencloak supporter being attacked by the mastiffs, and even Finn's hands trembling as he tried to open the lock. His mother was so skinny too. "I —"

"I know," she replied. "But there's no time. You need to go! It isn't safe here for Greencloaks anymore. They even . . . even Isilla is gone."

"But th-this is wrong," Conor finally stammered, shocked to hear of the gentle Greencloak who had presided over his Nectar Ceremony. She'd been a revered figure in Trunswick for as long as he could remember. "I don't want to leave you behind. Come with us."

"I can't," his mother said. "Your father and brothers still need me."

The others had finally noticed Conor's detainment, and they struggled to fight their way back to him. Nearby, Abeke and Uraza fought with two of the mastiffs. Overhead, a seagull, someone's spirit animal, circled and screamed.

Madness, Conor thought again. Their odds were technically better than in that forest battle, but in this chaos, the Greencloaks were doomed.

"How can I help?" he asked desperately.

"Did you get my letter? You've made us all so proud, Conor! You called Briggan, and surely there was a reason. Briggan was a great leader. You're good and wise. Do what you feel is right. You always do what's right."

"But I don't *know* what is right!"

His mother hugged him again. "Do what is right in your heart, Conor."

Conor hesitated. He was certain that if they left, all these Greencloak supporters would give their lives to shield them. Maybe they were okay with that. But he wasn't. He couldn't be. He just couldn't. Like Lady Evelyn had pointed out, he was a guardian. He couldn't just stay, though, either. Then they would all die. What was right in his heart?

He didn't know.

"Briggan," Conor said. He buried his hand in the wolf's ruff. "Can we help them? They *need* us."

What this group needed was a leader, he knew. He just didn't know if he and Briggan were ready to be leaders yet. Well, he knew Briggan was ready. He just didn't know if *he* was.

The wolf's ears pricked. He surveyed the chaos. Conor did too, and as he did, he saw that even worse was in store for them. The Earl of Trunswick's white horse was making its way jauntily down the streets toward the courtyard. The earl sat high on its back, his powerful lynx spirit animal lumbering beside him. He was riding in a leisurely fashion, as if he had come to the same conclusion Conor had: The Greencloak supporters had no chance.

This was the Fallens' last chance to run.

Conor and Briggan met each other's eyes. This time, neither of them looked away.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Conor shouted, "Meilin! Rollan! Abeke!"

When he was sure he'd caught their attention, he gestured wildly for them to join him.

Meilin reached him first. "Come on! Let's go."

"We're helping," Conor said. "It's what we're meant to do."

Conor's mother nodded. She stepped back, tightening her hands on the piece of wood she'd used to hit the guard.

"What did you have in mind?" Rollan asked.

"Training room, like we practiced. Find weapons where we can and fight as a team."

He didn't have to say it twice. Rollan brandished his knife, Meilin put up her fists, and Abeke crouched low beside Uraza. Briggan tipped back his head and let out a long, cool howl. The sound pierced the fighting. It raised the hair on

the back of Conor's neck and on his arms. Every spirit animal there turned all attention to the wolf.

In that brief silence, Conor shouted, "Greencloaks! Attack!"

They moved forward as one creature. Uraza slunk low before them, Briggan charged beside them, and Essix swept by overhead. They threw themselves into the battle. But not as four people fighting four separate targets. As a single entity dispatching one enemy at a time and then moving on to the next.

Rollan fought with his dagger. Abeke brandished a torch. Conor swept up a shovel from a cart near the blacksmith's. Meilin still preferred to fight bare-handed.

It didn't take long for their efforts to catch the eyes of the other Greencloak supporters. The first to catch on had been fighting with only the help of her spirit animal, a goat. But when she saw the four of them battling as a team, she leaped in behind them. Then a man with an owl. Then a young man with no visible spirit animal. When they saw how the Fallen had found weapons and worked together, they began doing the same.

It was working. The cacophony was dimming. The guards were falling back. The mastiffs were finished.

We're doing it, Briggan! Conor thought fiercely. He could feel the wolf's power surging through him, giving him strength. It was like he was a wolf himself. He was faster, stronger, sharper. This was what the bond could be.

They were winning.

Then the Earl of Trunswick's voice rang over the courtyard.

"If you want this man to live, I suggest you lay down your weapons!"

In the uneven torchlight, the Earl of Trunswick stood on an auction block at the other side of the courtyard. Finn stood in his grasp. The earl's sword was pressed against his throat, and his lynx prowled the block, as if daring anyone to intervene.

The fighting stopped. The only sound was that of several people trying to catch their breath.

Finn's voice was softer than the earl's, but in that ragged quiet, it was just as audible. "Go. Don't listen to him! Just go!"

Conor's heart ached. His mother nodded at him. *Just go!*

All the other Greencloak supporters were watching Conor, Rollan, Abeke, and Meilin to see what their next move was. There were few enough guards that the supporters would have been able to take them on easily if the earl hadn't had Finn hostage.

"If you go," the earl warned with the familiar Trunswick jeer in his voice, "I won't just kill him now. I'll put him back where he belongs. In the Howling House! Don't worry, Finn Cooley! We'll burn that troubled bond out of you yet!"

Finn's hands shook, just as they had inside the Howling House. But when he spoke it was with a steady voice. "Go. This is bigger than me!"

Meilin hissed, "We can't leave him."

The earl traced the edge of his sword against Finn's skin. A shallow wound appeared, a few beads of blood drawing a line across his neck.

Finn pressed his lips together. He looked straight at Conor. "Take the rest of them out of here."

Conor needed a plan, but there was no plan. Meilin's agonized face meant that she didn't have one either. Rollan and Abeke shook their heads. His mother's eyebrows pulled together. She was in over her head.

Was this how it had to end? Handing Finn over to their enemy?

Suddenly a wall of flame appeared. It roared and spat and devoured as it hurtled across the cobblestones. Straight in the direction of the earl and Finn. It was so out of place that it took Conor a long second to realize what it was. A cart, piled high with burning straw. Smoke rolled off it in great, choking clouds.

Conor searched the courtyard's edge to see who had set the cart in motion. A small figure caught his eye. Dawson Trunswick, Devin's younger brother. When he saw that Conor had spotted him, he nodded in a nervous way and vanished into the blackness.

The cart blasted toward the auction block. The earl and his lynx leaped off the side to save their skins. Finn leaped the other way. He plunged through the blinding smoke toward the kids while the earl cursed on the other side of the cloud.

“Run!” Conor’s mother shouted as Finn reached them. She touched Conor’s face. “Now’s the time to run, my son! We’ll cover you. Take Finn and go!”

Blaring through the smoke, the earl roared furiously. There were words in it, but they were lost in his rage.

“Thank you . . .” Conor whispered to his mother. “Thank you!” he called louder, turning to the Greencloak supporters.

“Long live the true Great Beasts!” someone shouted.

The rest of the supporters echoed it. His mother’s smile was a proud thing indeed.

Conor’s heart swelled.

Then the supporters turned back to the smoke, weapons out, ready for the remaining guards.

The kids ran for it. In the back of Conor’s head was the thought that it was lucky, or strange, that Zerif and the other children hadn’t made an appearance to help the Trunswick guards, but he was too relieved to be making a getaway to think long on it. If they got out of Trunswick alive, he could devote more time to wondering if their absence was due to cowardice or strategy.

But for now: They ran.

The sounds of battle rose again in the courtyard, but no one emerged to follow them. Their allies were holding back the guards.

Soon there was no sound except for the noise of their footfalls slapping on the stones. Then the scuff of their boots on the bare ground beside the Trunswick wall. And then, as

they ran into the surrounding pastures, there was no sound at all.

Finn made a wordless gesture, and they all followed him into the blackest of nights.

GLENGAVIN

FINN CONTINUED TO SAVE THEIR LIVES. ROLLAN, HAVING considerable experience being chased, was fairly certain that the group's escape from Trunswick was thrilling but temporary. After all, he'd seen the smug Earl of Trunswick. More important, he'd seen the Earl of Trunswick's horse. Despite Rollan's testy relationship with his former mount, he was well aware that most people were faster on horseback than on foot.

But the Trunswick guards didn't catch up with them.

This was because Finn led them on an untraceable path. Close to Trunswick, he walked them through rivers to keep from leaving scent trails for hounds to track. After they'd put some distance between Trunswick and themselves, he led them into a strange, boulder-filled forest that no horse could enter. Tree branches hung as low as Rollan's waist. The rocks were covered with perpetually damp moss that ripped free if he wasn't careful as he climbed.

They walked and walked, over stranger and stranger trails. The more foreign the surroundings grew, the more comfortable Finn seemed to become. After he seemed satisfied that their path had been obscured enough, he scratched maps in the dirt with a stick and constructed shortcuts, mumbling to himself as he thought.

Which was how Rollan found himself hiking through deceptively friendly-looking green mountains, a rope around his waist connecting him to the next person in line, who also had a rope around *their* waist to the *next* person in line, and so on. The idea was that if Rollan fell, he'd have a safety catch. Rollan thought it was more likely that if he went down, they were all going down. But he guessed there was some comfort in the promise of company on the way down the mountainside.

As they traveled, Finn taught them an ancient Northern Euran method of sending coded messages.

"This is how you spell *Abeke*," Finn explained. He'd tied a mysterious number of knots into a ribbon. It didn't make much sense to Rollan, nor, Rollan noticed with some satisfaction, to Conor (who had been moping about since they left Trunswick anyway). Abeke and Meilin looked on very keenly, however. Finn continued, "You would just tie this ribbon onto the legs of a gilded pigeon from Trunswick and let it go. It will fly back to its home with your message."

Rollan couldn't think of anyone at the moment that he would send a message to. Possibly he could just write *Dear*

Mother, thanks for nothing, and send that bird in the general direction of Amaya.

They also talked about what Zerif had said about the Bile. At the news that the spirit animal bond could be forced, Conor's face became pensive, but Rollan wondered if it would really be such a bad thing if people could choose what sort of animal they had to live with for the rest of their lives. He didn't say it out loud, though. He could tell by the others' faces that it wouldn't be a popular opinion.

They hiked for what felt like weeks, although it was really just days. Rollan ate all the interesting food in his pack, and then all the boring food, and had finally started in on the unappealing food. Meanwhile, the landscape grew harsher and more unforgiving. The mountains became more gray and less green, with savage rocks biting up through the grass. The fields that stretched below turned dry gold and purple, beautiful but unsatisfying for any livestock. They passed no towns, no farms, no houses, no people.

As the food ran low and the landscape became more bleak, Finn became straighter and stronger. His chin was up and his white hair seemed to mark him as different and special instead of defeated and war-torn. This part of Eura seemed to feed him.

It wasn't feeding Rollan, though. He reckoned it was probably time to make peace with the probability of starving to death.

Then, on the day Rollan ate his last piece of jerky, they came to Glengavin.

Like Trunswick, it was surrounded by a stone wall, which they could see over from their high vantage point. But that was where the similarities between the cities ended.

For all its old-fashioned details, Trunswick had reminded Rollan a lot of the cities in Amaya. Those cities were all skinny streets and crowded buildings, and people using the roads to relieve themselves, and flies collected on top of things that used to be food. Merchants and thieves and drunkards. And bundles of filthy orphans like himself, of course. Cities were full of opportunities, most of them opportunities for bad things to happen to you. And they all sort of looked the same to Rollan. No matter how different a city's architectural flesh was, he could see the bones of desperation underneath.

But not Glengavin. In the center was a massive stone building. A fortress, or castle. Or perhaps *palace* was the best word for it. An older central bit had clearly been built with defense in mind. But the extensive stone wings on either side had clearly been constructed for beauty and luxury. They were studded with stained-glass windows like jewels. Gargoyles and carvings hung from every stone overhang. Deep blue flags flapped from poles and hung beside doors.

It was shockingly different from the rugged landscape outside the wall.

"Am I really awake?" Conor asked. "It looks like a dream."

Rumfuss, Rollan just thought. This looked like a place a Great Beast would be.

Abeke, the small black cat perched on her shoulders and Uraza standing by her side, just shook her head wordlessly.

Meilin and the panda regarded Glengavin pensively. “The gardens remind me of home,” she said with uncharacteristic wistfulness.

The stone manor was surrounded by acres of manicured plants and crushed gravel paths. Every bush was trimmed into a geometric shape. Every rose was pleasingly groomed. Lavender plants cut into squares led the way to the front entry.

The entire thing made Rollan feel a little strange inside. Since he’d become a full-time orphan, he had worked pretty hard to never be impressed by anything — hard to get disappointed that way — but he thought, maybe, he was impressed. Or excited even. Or possibly he was just hungry.

“Lady Evelyn said the Lord of Glengavin would welcome us,” Conor said dubiously.

“Yeah, we saw how well that went back in Trunswick,” Rollan replied.

“Maybe you could send Essix ahead,” Finn suggested. “She might be able to let us know if she thinks something is amiss.”

Rollan tipped his head back. Essix was sailing around overhead as usual. Within earshot. Not that that guaranteed she’d comply.

Meilin had crossed her arms and turned to stare at him expectantly.

Great, he thought. An audience always makes this easier.

Really casually, he said, "Hey. Essix."

The falcon kept circling. Her head was turned a little bit toward his voice, though. She heard him. But she wasn't going to do anything about it.

A little louder, Rollan called, "Essix."

Still more circling.

Now they were all looking at him.

"Problems?" Meilin asked, sweetly sarcastic.

"No," Rollan replied. He twirled his hand as if this is how he had meant it to go. "I don't tell her what to do. She doesn't tell me what to do. We have a great bond. Awesome. You know what? I'm going to go check out Glengavin myself."

Hiding his annoyance, he ripped loose the knotted rope around his waist and began to slip down the slope toward the wall. He only made it a few feet before Essix cried out and flapped off ahead of him.

Finn laughed — a rare sound from him. "Well, you two contrary animals are well matched, aren't you?"

"Oh, you know," Rollan said. "We like to keep the relationship fresh."

"It seems pretty fresh all right," Meilin murmured.

With a wrinkle of his nose, Rollan replied, "I'm going to choose to be the better man here and not say anything about how *fresh* you and your spirit animal smell." Meilin actually didn't smell — Rollan suspected girls didn't sweat — but the panda did have a distinct musky odor.

Rather arch, she countered, “Really? That’s what you have? *Smells* bad?”

“We all could use a bath,” Finn cut in. “Hopefully the welcome at Glengavin will be warm enough to afford us such luxuries.”

It seemed as if that might be a possibility too, because when Essix returned, she looked unconcerned. Reassured, they approached the gate. Over it stretched a plaque that read: THREE UNDENIABLE TRUTHS: LOVE, DEATH, AND THE LAW OF GLENGAVIN, KNOW ALL THREE WELL.

Rollan felt it wasn’t the most inspirational of mottos. Love was all right, he thought, but death wasn’t incredibly tempting. It was hard to say which side the Law of Glengavin came down on, but he guessed it probably wasn’t the hugging one.

The three guards, however, were not just pleasant, but actually excited to see them. After only the briefest of explanations from Finn, the group was brought inside.

“We are proud to welcome you to Glengavin,” one of the guards said. He had an enormous red beard and equally enormous red eyebrows. Rollan thought that they could all take cover in his facial hair in the event of an emergency. Even more impressive than his beard, however, was his leather armor. It was more intricate than any leatherwork Rollan had ever seen. Every inch was etched with tangled artwork, much like Finn’s tattoos. It seemed like the sort of thing that should be displayed on a shelf, not worn every day. Both guards also wore tartan kilts and leather sporrans

— fancy pouches that hung low around their waists. Short knives rested in scabbards tied at their ankles.

War is so pretty here, Rollan thought. He thought again of that plaque over the gate.

“We had heard rumors of four heroes,” the hairy guard said. “But we’d heard that one of them had summoned a black wildcat.”

“You heard wrong,” Meilin said coldly. “As you can tell, these animals are the Four Fallen.”

Finn, in a much milder voice, said, “There is much darkness on the move too. Where there are heroes, there are always villains. We’d all be wise to be wary of opportunists.”

“Oh, aye,” agreed the red-bearded guard, quite amiable. He reached to pet the black cat Abeke held. “This isn’t a Great Beast.”

“No,” Abeke said. “Her name is Kunaya.”

“You *named* her?” demanded Meilin, pressing her hand to her face.

“Does she have special powers?” the guard asked.

Meilin made a sour face. “Shedding. Clawing. Being heavy.”

Abeke merely smiled mysteriously. She was good at that. So was Uraza. Actually, so was the little black cat Kunaya. Smiling mysteriously was a rather feline magical power.

Rollan didn’t trust cats, but he thought they were all right. Better than weasels.

A messenger made his way to them, a little out of breath. "Lord MacDonnell is pleased to welcome the heroes! He is throwing a banquet in your honor tonight. Would you like to see your rooms?"

The four kids looked at each other, surprised. They couldn't have asked for a more opposite experience from Trunswick.

Rollan's stomach growled. Banquet!

The messenger mistook their silence. "They are quite nice rooms," he promised quickly. "No comfort is wanting!"

"Oh, no," Finn said. "It's just . . ."

Rollan finished, "It's nice to have such a *warm welcome*."

As they were led toward the main castle, Rollan glanced over his shoulder. The plaque about the three truths wasn't visible from this side, but he hadn't forgotten it.



It was indeed a warm welcome. Rollan and Conor were given a room to share. Though they were from very different backgrounds, both of them were equally stunned by the size of it. And the beds! — great poster beds, with a pillar at each corner supporting a draping fabric ceiling. One for each boy. Most inns in Amaya didn't even have two beds in a room, and when they did, it was only to cram five or six people — sometimes strangers — into the same space. And there was a private washbasin with soft cloths beside it. Fresh clothing had also been laid near the washbasin, two choices of outfits for each boy. One was a deep green

surcoat and kilt that matched the guards. The other was a more standard-issue Euran surcoat and leggings.

“No way am I wearing that kilt,” Rollan observed.

Conor touched the tartan wool fabric. “I think it’s interesting. Why not?”

“Too much like a uniform. You know how I feel about those. What did you think of that plaque over the gate?”

“Er, remind me what it said again?” Conor asked sheepishly, and Rollan remembered with a pang of regret that the boy was not a talented reader.

“Something about the Law of Glengavin. Death and hugging.”

Conor shrugged. “Seems like an orderly place. Makes sense they’d want people to obey the law. Why, are you feeling anything about it?”

After the dismal experience of asking Essix to check out Glengavin, Rollan had almost forgotten about her otherworldly powers of observation. It felt like a long time since they’d had a moment of connection.

“I just don’t like rules,” Rollan answered finally. “They’re like uniforms.”

The boys continued poking around in the room. All the furniture was very fancy, and probably expensive, but that impressed Rollan less than the pillows.

“Probably one thousand geese were plucked to fill this thing,” he told Conor, burying his face into it. It was a cloud of indistinct perfection.

“Two thousand,” Conor replied drowsily. Neither boy had had a decent night’s sleep since well before Trunswick. “Did you see the washbasin? You can get rid of your fresh smell.”

He made a face as he said it so that Rollan knew he was joking about Rollan’s comment to Meilin earlier.

“Oh, sure, I’ll get right on that.”

But neither of them did. Instead, they let the pillows suffocate them for a few hours until a messenger woke them for the banquet. They washed and dressed before following another servant. The great hall was as richly decorated as the gardens. A woman in a brilliant dress played a skin-headed drum. A man in a matching tunic played a set of humming bagpipes. A younger teen played a carved wooden harp. The sound beat up the tapestry-covered walls.

“Look at this place,” Conor said to Rollan.

“Look at *you*,” Rollan replied. Conor had opted for the kilt. Rollan had not.

Flushing, Conor said, “It seemed polite.”

Polite was never really on Rollan’s list of priorities.

“If we have to make a speedy escape and you have to do it in that skirt, that’s all on you,” Rollan whispered.

As the bagpipes buzzed a merry jig, Meilin and Abeke entered the hall. Both looked startlingly different in the lush green surcoats that had been provided. Meilin in particular looked stunning and odd. It took Rollan a moment to realize that it was because it had been a long time since he’d seen her *clean*.

The two girls joined them. Meilin's eyes lingered on Rollan for a long moment before finding Essix. The falcon perched on an unused torch holder and ran her beak through the feathers on her leg.

"Rollan, you look *clean*," Meilin said. Her gaze still seemed to linger on him a little longer than usual, a fact that didn't bother Rollan a bit.

"Hey," Conor protested.

"Oh," Meilin added hurriedly, "you do too. The green, uh, brings out your eyes. It's nice to be staying somewhere *civilized*."

"More civilized than I'm used to. Any sign of Rumfuss?" Conor asked.

Rollan said, "Yeah, any boars running around the castle?"

"Actually," Abeke pointed out, "there is a tapestry with a boar on it in the hall near our room. I think it is Rumfuss. I asked the servant who led us here, and she said he was the boar in the gardens — but nothing more."

"Boar in the garden?" Meilin echoed. "She wouldn't say anything more?"

"She said it was against the law for servants to carry on with guests."

"That's a funny law," Rollan said.

"This place seems to have a lot of them," Abeke agreed. "I tried to leave our door open for some air and one of the guards told me that only the lord or the lord's family was allowed to leave their doors open. They said it was a privilege."

Rollan sniffed indignantly. "That seems stupid."

Meilin broke in. "It's exotic. But I'm sure Zhong's customs would seem strange to an outsider as well."

"That's true," Abeke agreed. "Nilo is quite different from Eura or Amaya, especially some of the more remote villages. At least it is pleasant here."

It was indeed pleasant. Conor asked, "Where's Finn?"

"Talking to Lord MacDonnell, I believe," Meilin answered. "The Lord of Glengavin."

Rollan's stomach growled loud enough for it to be heard over the music.

Abeke looked sympathetic. "Have you seen the food?"

Long tables lined the edges of the room. One sat higher than the others on a raised platform. All the chairs were fancy at that higher table, but the fanciest was a gold-painted one, like a throne. The other tables were piled with food. There were cakes soaked in sugar syrup and potatoes glazed with butter. Fruit swam in cream. Oatcakes formed teetering stacks. Sausages lay in savory pyramids. Blushing lumps of carrot and rich knobs of beef floated in tureens.

None of the many people in the hall had touched the food yet. They all seemed to be waiting for a cue.

Finn entered the hall with a big, jolly-looking man — Lord MacDonnell. He had a tidily trimmed dark beard and wide-spaced, amused eyes. He wore a kilt and tall wool socks. A great tartan sash draped one shoulder and was pinned at his hip with a dagger-shaped brooch.

Everything about Lord MacDonnell seemed cheerful. A little too obviously cheerful, perhaps. As a street rat, Rollan had learned that a smile could sometimes hide wicked thoughts better than a sneer.

He didn't trust him.

He didn't know why. Probably because he didn't trust anybody. In any case, something in Rollan whispered, *Maybe not everything about him is jolly.*

As if confirming this suspicion, Essix swung down suddenly to perch on Rollan's shoulder. Her talons clung tightly to his leather jerkin. Leaning close to him, her beak parted as she made a soft noise in his ear.

"I know," he hissed. "I'm watching."

But she made another soft noise. And this time, Rollan's vision suddenly clicked into sharper focus. It was as if he had been observing the world in black and white before, and now it was in color. He saw how the servants' postures became more tense now that Lord MacDonnell and Finn had entered the room. He noticed how the musicians hesitated, confirming that they were still wanted. He saw how the two children, a boy and a girl, who walked behind MacDonnell were spitting images of him — the lord's children, surely. He noted that there was no Lady MacDonnell in evidence. He noticed the wrinkle between Lord MacDonnell's eyebrows. He saw the dais where the lord was meant to sit with his children and wife, and he noticed that there was a raised seat for the lord of the castle's spirit animal to rest on. And he noticed that seat was covered with dust.

It was almost too much to notice all at once. He could see with Essix's great eyes, but he still had to process it with Rollan's less-than-great brain. He staggered a bit. Conor grabbed Rollan's arm (how clearly Rollan could observe even Conor, with his worn shepherd's hands). As Rollan swatted at him in protest, Essix flapped from his shoulder. Immediately everything became ordinary again.

The sudden ordinariness was as overpowering as the stunning vision had been. It seemed impossible to go back to seeing things in the usual way after observing the world with Essix's amazing power.

If our bond was better, Rollan wondered, is that how I'd see things all the time?

Finn, Lord MacDonnell, and the two children walked up to Rollan and the others.

"Welcome! I am Lord MacDonnell, and this is my home!" The man had a big, jolly voice to match his big, jolly body. "Greencloaks are always welcome here. Glengavin is a home to all heroes."

Finn murmured a noise of polite gratitude.

"This is my son, Culloden," Lord MacDonnell said, gesturing to the boy behind him, "and this is my daughter, Shanna."

Both children bowed. Conor, Meilin, and Abeke bowed back, with Rollan quickly chiming in with a sort-of bow-like movement of his own. Finn then introduced the four kids, adding, "The four Great Beasts need no introduction, I'm sure."

“No, indeed! Where’s your green, lad?” Lord MacDonnell asked as Rollan glanced around, trying to spot where Essix had suddenly gone to.

Meilin elbowed Rollan. Lord MacDonnell was talking to *him*.

“Oh, that,” Rollan said. “I’m less a member of the Greencloaks and more a member of Let’s-Save-Erdas.”

Lord MacDonnell laughed heartily. “Aren’t we all. Aren’t we all! Shall we eat?”

He clapped his hands.

Instantly, every sound in the hall went silent. Conversation stopped. Not a single footstep shuffled on the stone. The musicians’ hands slapped to dampen their strings.

The quiet was eerie.

Then Lord MacDonnell smiled hugely again and clapped once more.

The musicians scrambled to play a more stately march as he made his way to the feast. Lord MacDonnell plucked a single grape from a platter. Every eye in the room watched as he dropped it in his mouth.

The moment he’d eaten it, conversation buzzed back up again and everyone moved to collect food for themselves. This must be another law. How tense that silence had been. Rollan wondered what the penalty was for finding yourself on the wrong side of the Law of Glengavin.

Rollan and Meilin hung back as Finn, Conor, and Abeke helped themselves.

"This is weird," Rollan said.

"I think it's great," Meilin said. "Look how well-run this is. Most banquets and parties are disasters. This runs like an army. And his children are perfect."

"Perfect minions," replied Rollan, watching them. The two children followed just behind Lord MacDonnell, nodding when spoken to.

"That's respect," Meilin said. "I wouldn't expect *you* to recognize it."

"Oh, don't pull rank on me now —" started Rollan. He broke off as Lord MacDonnell headed back their way.

"Aren't you two going to enjoy the feast?" Lord MacDonnell boomed in a pleasant baritone. "The salmon is divine."

"We were just admiring it," Meilin said smoothly. "And also how well your children obey."

Rollan was about to open his mouth to point out that he had not been admiring that particular aspect of the night, but Meilin pinched his elbow, out of sight of Lord MacDonnell. Rollan swallowed his words.

"Well, my castle, my law!" Lord MacDonnell said with a laugh.

The image of the perfect guest, Meilin asked him, "Will you tell me more about how you run this banquet?"

She was so clever at disguising her true emotions that even Rollan couldn't tell if her interest was manufactured or genuine. She and Lord MacDonnell went to get food together, chatting the entire way.

With a frown, Rollan took a single sausage from the very end of the table and ate it, while simultaneously looking for Essix and surveying the banquet.

His attention was snagged by the musicians. A singer had joined them and they were singing a song that he knew. It was a street song about the Great Beasts that all the urchins in Concorba could sing in their sleep. The verses went through all the Great Beasts in order, the tune annoyingly monotonous, until by the fifteenth and final Great Beast, most listeners were ready to pummel whoever had decided to start the song in the first place.

The musicians played so skillfully, changing up the harmonies in each verse, that Rollan didn't even realize that he had forgotten to be bored until it was over. In fact, it stirred that same strange part in him that the first sight of Glengavin had. This place sure was getting to him.

He told the musicians, "Usually I hate that song."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the singer said.

"But not this time," Rollan finished. "You guys are great."

The singer smiled graciously. "Thank you."

The teenage harpist piped up, her voice annoyed: "But no one can hear us on the other side of the room. It's too noisy."

The musicians and Rollan gazed around the great hall. The arched ceiling should have been a good soundboard for the music, but the thick tapestries on the wall swallowed all sound.

"If you were higher," Rollan suggested, "the sound would carry better. Above the tapestries. There?"

He pointed to a small, disused balcony.

"Oh, but —" started the singer in a small voice.

"Probably not," replied the drummer.

"Not this time," the harpist added.

Rollan was about to comment on their apparent fear of heights when he realized he could see movement on the balcony. It was Essix. At first he thought she was just flapping for a takeoff. But then her wings fluttered even more violently, and he realized she was trapped somehow. It made him feel strangely fluttery himself. Anxious.

The musicians' gazes followed Rollan.

"Is that Essix?" breathed the harpist.

"Yes," Rollan said, a little grim. "And she seems to be trapped. I need to know the way up to that balcony."

"Oh, but —" started the singer.

"Probably not," replied the drummer.

The harpist said, "No. No, you shouldn't go up there."

"I have to," Rollan said. Their attitude toward the balcony was beginning to make him feel a little uneasy, though.

"Why, is it unstable?"

"No," the singer said. He glanced urgently at Lord MacDonnell, who was engaged in conversation at the raised table at the end of the hall. "No one is supposed to stand higher than the lord of the castle. It's the law."

Rollan thought all laws were stupid, but this one was stupider than most. He said, "But I won't be standing. I'm

freeing a bird and then coming right down.”

The musicians conferred among themselves.

“No,” the harpist said finally. “I’ll go free her. You’re a guest. You shouldn’t have to risk it.”

“*Risk* it?” echoed Rollan. The sight of Essix flapping was making him feel even more uneasy. “She has to be freed! What if she’s hurt? If I’m not supposed to be up there, is he going to do it himself?”

This made all the musicians glance anxiously at Lord MacDonnell.

“I’ll just go,” the harpist said. Her voice was brave, but her face looked sick. The other musicians placed their hands on her shoulders and nodded. She moved down the wall to a small door. When she opened it, Rollan saw the steep stairs that led up to the balcony. She disappeared inside.

The other musicians muttered, twisting their hands. Rollan didn’t get it.

The harpist reappeared on the balcony above them.

The musicians kept fretting.

In just a moment, Essix flapped free of whatever had trapped her on the balcony.

It was barely a minute. No time at all.

The harpist moved back toward the staircase at the wall.

Just then, Lord MacDonnell looked up sharply from his gilded chair. His eyes went right to the balcony. The harpist’s face was pale as the moon.

Without taking his gaze from her, Lord MacDonnell clapped. Just once.

Immediately, all sound ceased.

Lord MacDonnell said, "Do my people not know my law?"

The hall was quiet.

"Scribe, what is the sixteenth rule of the hall?"

A squirrelly boy at the end of the raised table spoke up.

"No one shall sit higher than the lord of the castle."

Everyone's eyes were now on the harpist on the elevated balcony.

"Oh, my lord, I didn't mean it as a dishonor!" she cried. "I was just trying to —"

"My castle," said Lord MacDonnell. "My law."

"Please —"

"Demoted!" Lord MacDonnell shouted. "You are no longer the court harpist. Ten years in the kitchen, then beg for my forgiveness."

"My lord," begged the harpist as the guards approached the doorway to the balcony. "That harp was made by my father."

"And you will destroy it right now," Lord MacDonnell ordered.

"My lord —"

"Did you know my law?"

The harpist hung her head. As Rollan's heart charged in his chest, she stood there until guards climbed the stairs to fetch her. Limply, she accompanied them and stood before the harp.

"My castle," repeated Lord MacDonnell. "My law."

Rollan didn't need Essix's supernatural eyesight to see how much the instrument meant to the harpist. He couldn't bear that she'd known this might happen, and risked it anyway for Essix and him.

Swiftly, Rollan stepped in front of the high table, his hands burning with anger and guilt. He held his chin up high. "It was my fault. She climbed there to free Essix for me."

Lord MacDonnell raised a dark eyebrow. "Ah, it is the boy who walks by himself." He didn't say anything for a moment, and then he said, "There are three true things in this place: love, death, and the Law of Glengavin. Her punishment remains. But for your bravery in taking responsibility, join me here at the knights' table. Glengavin is a home to heroes and I see that you are becoming one."

Rollan gritted his teeth. The last thing he wanted was to accept a reward for his stupidity. This was all his fault.

But Meilin, seated at one of the other tables, found his gaze. Her eyes flashed. It was the visual equivalent of her pinching him before. It meant *Just do it!*

She was probably right. A nobleman who just ruined a girl's life for climbing onto a balcony probably could think of something worse for an orphan who refused to sit at his table.

Rollan looked over his shoulder at the slump-shouldered singer. His blood was starting to boil, but he tamped it down. *One day, he thought, nobles won't be able to do this to us.*

But until then, he sat at Lord MacDonnell's right hand, three seats away from him. Directly next to the noble was his son, Culloden, eating quietly. And then was Shanna, making shapes in her potatoes. Then Rollan.

In front of them, the guards stood by as the harpist smashed her own harp. Tears ran down her face and the splinters of the instrument cut her hands, but she didn't complain anymore.

Then, as she was led away to the kitchen with slumped shoulders and bloody hands, Lord MacDonnell muttered, as if to himself, "My castle. My law."

WINDOW

THAT NIGHT, IN THE WEIRD QUIET OF A BEAUTIFUL, VAST guest room in Glengavin, Conor dreamed of falling out the window into the garden. He heard the tune the musicians had been playing right before Lord MacDonnell had punished the harpist. The song turned discordant and suddenly he saw an animal moving between the manicured perfection of the green gardens. A boar. It was huge and terrifying, all bristles and tusks. When it looked over its shoulder at him, Conor instinctively knew it was no ordinary boar.

“Rumfuss!” he called. “I need to talk to you!”

The boar immediately ran through the bushes and into the brushy wild outside of the gardens. The landscape here was scruffy and rocky, with lots of nooks and crannies for smaller animals to hide in. But Rumfuss didn’t seem interested in hiding. Instead, the boar broke into an ungainly gallop and led Conor in a lopsided figure eight, past part of the castle.

“Wait!” Conor called again.

Suddenly another animal darted in front of him, through a curtain of purple wisteria. It was an enormous hare — even in the dream it felt familiar, as if Conor had dreamed it before. Its powerful hind legs propelled it one way and then the other. It was running away from Glengavin. When Conor turned back to Rumfuss, the boar was gone.

“Wolf boy, wake up!”

It took Conor a moment to realize the hissed voice came from Rollan in the next bed over. He blinked in the darkness.

“Are you awake?” Rollan whispered. “There’s something outside the window.”

Conor quietly rolled over to listen. Rollan’s eyes glistened in the faint light from outside. Heavy curtains blocked most of the light and all the landscape, but the other boy was right. Something was shuffling outside the window. It couldn’t be anything good — their room was four stories above the ground and there was no balcony.

Sliding out of bed, Conor gestured to Briggan. The wolf climbed to his feet and faced the window. His hackles prickled as another scraping sound came from outside.

The window was cracked and the curtains moved slightly.

Rollan swung his feet silently over the edge of his bed and pulled a dagger from under his pillow. He held up five fingers, then four, then three. Counting down.

When he got to one, both he and Conor grabbed a curtain and pulled them open.

A figure stood on the sill, wild-haired and ferocious. Wind tore at the person's clothing. The figure balanced precariously on the window ledge. There was nothing behind but dozens of feet of open air.

Conor gasped, "Meilin?"

Because it was Meilin. She swayed on the edge of the window. Her eyes were fast shut, her mouth moving. Tears coursed down her cheeks. She barely looked like herself.

"She's sleepwalking!" Conor exclaimed, horrified. "Grab her!"

Rollan and Conor each seized an arm, pulling her into the room. When she landed on the floor with an unceremonious crash, she moaned and shook her head.

"Wake up," Conor said gently, shaking her shoulder.

It was strange to see her face with tears on it. It must be difficult to know your father was missing and your home city was destroyed. To belong somewhere, and then suddenly to not.

Rollan leaned over her too, concern written on his face. But when he caught Conor looking, Rollan quickly slapped a smirk on his face and quipped, "Yep, wakey wakey."

Retrieving a pitcher of water from beside his bed, he dumped it over her. With a muffled shriek, Meilin leaped from the ground. She pinned Rollan against the wall, her hand against his throat, her hair dripping.

"I was *awake*," she snapped. "Conor woke me."

Rollan grinned saucily. "I know."

She slapped him. Then, to Conor, she said, "Thank you for pulling me inside."

"Hey, I helped," Rollan protested, but she ignored him.

"What happened?" Conor asked uncertainly. "What were you doing out there?"

Meilin stoked the fireplace to give them some more light, and then returned to the window. Now that she was inside, she seemed a little undone by the dizzying height. She gestured to the next window over. "Our room is over there. I must have been sleepwalking. I was dreaming . . ."

"Were you dreaming of being a spider?" Rollan asked. He joined them at the window, Meilin's slap mark bright on his cheek. "Because you must have had sticky feet to get from there to here."

"No, there's a tiny ledge," Conor pointed out. "You're lucky you didn't fall, Meilin. I can't believe you did that while asleep." He didn't want to remark on the tear marks still visible on her face, because the idea of pointing them out seemed embarrassing to both him and her. But he was certain that Meilin would never cry while awake.

Rollan opened his mouth and then shut it again. Meilin's furious face dared him to say anything.

"I am going back to my bed," Rollan said, "because it is good and true and would never lie to me. You two can do what you like."

"That's a good idea," Meilin said as he climbed back into his bed. "Tomorrow we have a long day ahead of us, looking for Rumfuss." She placed her hand on the doorknob.

“Be careful,” Conor warned.

Rollan jerked his blanket down from his chin. “Are you sure you don’t want to crawl back out of the window?”

Meilin gave him a withering look and slipped back out into the hall.

Rollan disappeared back down into his pillows. He muttered, “My castle, my law.”

VOICES

THE FIRST THING ABEKE NOTICED WHEN SHE WOKE UP WAS that it was not quite morning. The room was still blue-edged and black-shadowed, though birds sang thinly outside. The second thing she noticed was that the door was cracked open, and what looked like Uraza's tail was disappearing through it. Presumably following the rest of Uraza.

As Abeke pushed herself up and blinked, trying to decide if she had seen the leopard leave, she heard a faint *pad-pad-pad* and saw Kunaya's dark form trot out into the hall too.

"Uraza!" hissed Abeke, shooting a glance at the lump that was Meilin's sleeping form. This was not the place to go wandering. But the leopard didn't return.

"Mwuwuh?" Meilin asked the room sleepily.

"Uraza's in the hall," Abeke replied in a hushed whisper. "I'm going to get her."

“Mwuf. Need help?” Even half-asleep, Meilin sounded a little suspicious of Abeke creeping out of the room so early.

“I am all right!”

“Mwufay.” The other girl turned back into her pillow.

Abeke headed down the hall. She could smell the faint scent of bread baking — the bakers up early. Maybe that was what had lured the big cat out of the room. It took her a moment to glimpse the forms of the two cats disappearing around a corner.

“Uraza!” she hissed once more. But she didn’t dare to do it again. If there was a law against leaving your bedroom door open, surely there was a law against sneaking around while no one else was up. She had no choice but to slink after the two cats.

Closed doors lined the high-ceilinged hall, and every few yards was an alcove containing something unexpected and magical: a delicate water fountain trailing water over carvings, a cage of sleeping canaries, a pillowed chair with lion’s paws, a tree covered with white blossoms.

Uraza paused at the next corner, her lavender eyes keen. She wanted the girl to know that she wasn’t trying to be disobedient. This was no helter-skelter chase through a castle. This time, Uraza was leading her.

Crouching low, Abeke silently caught up to Uraza. Together, the two cats and the girl made their way past the black rectangles of closed doors. From the way the leopard stalked — pausing every few steps — it seemed she wasn’t quite sure where she was going or what she was looking for.

The hall grew lighter. Gradually Abeke realized she could hear the dull murmur of voices coming from inside one of these many rooms. From the thrashing of Uraza's tail, this was what she had been looking for. They scouted back and forth, trying to get closer, until Abeke found a long, skinny room full of washbasins. Morning light came in a large window at the end, suddenly strong and bright. One wall was lined with animal-headed fountains, each faucet carved with a different species. Cloths, perfumes, and draping robes sat on a long shelf opposite.

Abeke pressed her ear to the washbasin wall, and suddenly the voices came into focus.

"Look," said a familiar voice, "clearly Lord MacDonnell is a little crazy. But we aren't going to be here long. All we need to do is find Rumfuss and then find the girl and get out of here before he does any more of his crazy 'my castle, my law' stuff."

"How will we persuade Rumfuss to give up his talisman?" asked another voice. This one also sounded familiar, and had a Niloan accent. Suddenly Abeke knew who they were — and why Uraza had been so intent on finding them. Devin and Karmo!

"Give up?" Devin scoffed. "Look at our beasts! We'll take it."

They must have made it to Glengavin in the night! Abeke leaped back from the wall and out of the washroom. She needed to tell the others immediately.

But as she rounded the corner back to the hall, she was brought up short. She stood face-to-face with Devin Trunswick. Uraza stood nose-to-nose with his black panther, Elda. Behind him stood tall, dark Karmo, and beside him was his huge hammerkop stork, Impundulu. The bird's head and beak were nearly as long as Karmo's arm.

In just a second, Abeke had snatched a large glass bottle of perfume from the table beside her. Makeshift weapon. She *had* been paying attention in the training room back at Greenhaven.

"Ah, Abeke," Devin said with a clever smile that he seemed to have learned from Zerif. He didn't seem at all concerned by the prospect of getting hit over the head with a perfume bottle. "I don't intend to murder you. We were just talking about you."

"How did you get in here?" Abeke demanded.

"Glengavin is a hall for heroes," Devin boomed, clearly mocking Lord MacDonnell. He gestured to his spirit animal, who thrashed her tail. "Elda makes me very popular in Eura."

"Not in this particular corridor," Abeke replied. She jerked her chin toward Karmo. "Who is he?"

"This is my friend Karmo," Devin said. "He's from Nilo too."

I know, thought Abeke, with a pang of homesickness. *I heard.*

Karmo's eyes were narrowed, as if Devin and he weren't particularly friendly. He said, "I've come to see if I can

change your mind. Come back to us. Come back to Nilo. Our people need us to be beacons of hope.”

Taken by surprise, she blinked. Was *she* the girl she had heard them talking about? “*What?* I am not coming back. I have seen enough to know who fights for what I believe in. The Greencloaks are the good guys.”

Karmo raised a dark, handsome eyebrow. He was the sort of boy that her sister, Soama, would have been silly over back home. “Are they?”

Abeke nodded. “I am very fortunate that they allowed me to switch sides. They understand the value of mercy, unlike your master, Zerif.”

Devin scoffed. “They would not have killed you, Abeke. You know that. You walk with Uraza. The Greencloaks want you alive.”

Abeke didn’t like this conversation. There wasn’t any chance that she would fight with the Conquerors again, but it awoke all kinds of unpleasant tangled feelings inside her. For a pained moment she thought of Shane, the friend she’d had to leave behind. “You won’t convince me, Devin. My spirit animal chooses the Greencloaks.”

“But is she right?” Karmo broke in gently.

“Of course she is! She’s a Great Beast!” The fierceness of Abeke’s reply made Uraza growl beside her. Abeke could feel the power of Uraza seeping into her, preparing her for a fight. Her nerves danced. Next to Devin, Elda dropped down, tail thrashing even harder, her black fur scuffed up

threateningly. Impundulu clawed the floor with one foot. The atmosphere felt charged and dangerous.

“The Great Beasts aren’t always right,” Karmo said. “They may mean well, but just like humans, their decisions are fallible. After all, aren’t you and I here in search of a Great Beast who flees us both?”

Abeke didn’t want to admit that he was right. But Uraza was not like Rumfuss. She’d died standing up for what she believed in.

“Abeke, I came to bring you back so that you and I could lead Nilo to a better future,” Karmo said. He held out a hand. “Come with me?”

He asked in such a mild, kind way. Not at all as if his hammerkop stood threateningly beside him, one foot raised, giant beak parted.

“I have chosen my side,” Abeke said harshly.

Devin shrugged. “Well, you’re coming with us either way. Karmo?”

Abeke swung the perfume bottle just as Uraza sprang at Elda. Devin let out a muffled cry as he blocked the blow. Karmo stood by quite calmly. As Abeke reached up to swing again, Impundulu flapped its wings. Lifting from the ground, the bird punched its legs into Abeke’s abdomen.

There was an arcing flash of light as the bird’s feet touched Abeke. The contact was more than a blow — it was a jolt. Her limbs suddenly went numb. Karmo was on her in a moment, pinning her arms behind her. Kunaya had appeared from nowhere and she wound around Abeke’s

legs, mewing piteously. Uraza and Elda fought in the hall, making soft thumps when their bodies hit the walls. Elda was larger, but Uraza was greater. She would win a battle against the black panther . . . but then what? There were still two humans against Abeke, and another spirit animal with strange abilities.

Abeke opened her mouth to shout for help. Devin stuffed one of the cloths into her mouth.

“Put her in passive form,” he told Abeke, “or I will cut your throat.”

She had no choice. She held out her arm pleadingly, and Uraza disappeared in a blitz of light, forming a tattoo on Abeke’s arm, right next to where Karmo’s hand held her in place.

“There was an easier way,” Karmo said into Abeke’s ear.

Devin held out his arm, and Elda immediately vanished into passive form. It was like an instantly obeyed order.

“Don’t look so angry, Abeke,” he said. “You’re going home.”

LORD MACDONNELL

BECAUSE MEILIN LIKED ORDER, SHE LIKED GLENGAVIN. Although the others were horrified by what had happened to the musician the night before, Meilin could see where MacDonnell was coming from. The harpist had known the rule. She could have approached MacDonnell with their predicament and asked for a solution.

“If you like him so well,” Rollan said over an impressive breakfast, “why don’t you convince him to let us go see Rumfuss?”

Meilin daintily bit into a crumpet. She chewed it and swallowed it entirely before answering, “That is my plan.”

Finn, on the other side of the long and mostly empty table, looked up from his own meal. “Hospitality is very important in the North, and if we hope to impress Lord MacDonnell into allowing us access to Rumfuss, we must convince him that we are worthy. Where’s Abeke?”

Meilin had just been wondering this herself. Abeke had not returned after going after Uraza this morning. It was possible she'd gotten into trouble. But it was also possible that Abeke was hunting for Rumfuss on her own or otherwise doing something for the Conquerors.

Meilin didn't know how long it would take for her to trust Abeke. All she knew was that it hadn't happened yet.

"She went out this morning and hasn't come back yet."

Finn narrowed his eyes. "That seems troubling. Meilin, why don't you, Conor, and Rollan go speak to MacDonnell while I look for Abeke? I can move about the castle more safely than you three; I know more of the customs."

"And what is it you want us to do?" Rollan demanded. "*Be charming?*"

As Lord MacDonnell entered the room, Meilin stood up and patted her hair. "I don't have a problem with that." She called loudly, "Lord MacDonnell! Good morning!"

Behind her back, she gestured for the others to join her.

MacDonnell seemed pleased to see them. He boomed, "How are you liking that kilt, Conor? It looks fine on you! You'd be a good addition to Glengavin. You and your wolf."

"Briggan is not really mine, my lord," Conor said. "If anything, I suppose I'm his."

"Where is he at this fine morning?"

Conor held up his arm. Briggan was frozen in mid-flight in the tattoo.

"Let that wolf loose!"

Conor released the wolf with a brilliant flash. Immediately Briggan frisked around him. Playfully, the wolf took Conor's hand in his mouth. He looked ferocious when he pretended to bite Conor, but he meant it all in good fun.

Meilin glanced up to MacDonnell to see what he thought of this.

The older man's expression had gone very un-jolly, but it snapped back into good cheer when he noticed Meilin watching. "What's your surname, boy?"

"You mean my last name?" Conor blushed, and Meilin felt bad for him. "I don't have one. I'm just a shepherd's son, my lord."

"No shame in that," Lord MacDonnell said. "What's your father's name?"

"Fenray."

"If you were from Glengavin, you'd be Conor MacFenray," Lord MacDonnell said. "*Mac* means son of."

Conor tried it. "Conor MacFenray."

"You could pick any old last name, you know," Rollan said from just behind them. "Who says you have to have your father's name? I'd pick something like SuperStrongGuy. Rollan SuperStrongGuy. Or Rollan FALCONMASTER."

Both Meilin and Conor raised their eyebrows. Rollan was a long way away from being a falconmaster.

With a booming chuckle — always the booming! — Lord MacDonnell led them to an open courtyard in the center of Glengavin. On the grass and under the covered stone walkways, more than forty soldiers in kilts were training.

Only, Meilin would not have guessed it was training if Lord MacDonnell hadn't told them. Because instead of engaging in mock battles, the men copied music into decorated books, practiced harp and lute, and recited ballads at each other. Only a few of them had spirit animals, but when they did, the spirit animals seemed content to help them with these strange tasks. Next to one man, a shaggy Highland cow stood patiently as her human partner used her massive horns to hold her elaborate knitting. Another man was aided in his harp-playing by a stoat. It plucked the low notes. He plucked the high ones.

Rollan said, "Sweet merciful chicken. What are they training for? Becoming a princess?"

"War," Lord MacDonnell said.

"War against princesses?"

"War's useless if you don't know how to live with peace," Lord MacDonnell boomed. "Not very long ago, Glengavin had the best soldiers in Eura. But our skill was meaningless. We were almost destroyed by war. All we did was murder each other, and for nothing. Cattle! Glory! We were great warriors, but we didn't know what to do if we weren't fighting."

Meilin raised an eyebrow. Finn would have liked to hear this description. "So you turned to the arts."

"Exactly," Lord MacDonnell said. "Now we spend equal time on training in the arts as we do keeping our muscles fit."

“That’s a sweet story,” Rollan spoke up. “But what about those musicians last night? The ones that are now scrubbing pots?”

Cheeky, Rollan, Meilin thought. Be careful.

But Lord MacDonnell merely said, “Disorder leads to war, and I won’t risk more war. My castle, my law. It’s not difficult to follow the rules.”

They stopped to watch two men who were laughing and playing chess.

Lord MacDonnell said, “Will you young heroes know what to do when the battle is over? You’re spending your childhood saving the world. What happens when it’s saved?”

“We should be so lucky,” Meilin said.

Conor said, “I know what I will do. I will return to my family’s farm with enough money to pay off our debts, and then I will take my place among my brothers as a shepherd, just like my father before me.”

No, Conor, Meilin thought. You’re forgetting Briggan. You can’t take a wolf among the sheep.

Rollan’s eye briefly caught hers, and Meilin knew that he was thinking the same thing.

“My lord,” Meilin said, “speaking of saving the world — the Great Beast, Rumfuss. There’s a rumor he’s locked in your gardens.”

MacDonnell continued to stare at one of the chess players for a moment, then turned to Meilin. “Indeed he is.”

He said this very simply, the same way one might say, “It’s a touch rainy today,” or “I’m wearing new shoes.”

She tried to sound quite collected. “We really would like to speak with him.”

MacDonnell shook his head. “Only I am allowed to hunt in the gardens. Even if your hunt is just for a word with the Great Beast. It’s for the best — he’s a miserable, grumpy creature. He’d likely trample you.”

“Sir, it’s important,” Conor said. “It’s why we’ve come all this way.”

“To collect the talismans. To recapture the power of the Great Beasts. To destroy the invaders.” MacDonnell said all this dismissively, like he didn’t believe it. “Finn told me last night why it is you seek Rumfuss. The Greencloaks are wrong, if you ask me. No man-made machination could possibly fix soured relationships with spirit animals. Sometimes, things have simply gone too wrong.”

“How can you believe that with such conviction?” Meilin asked.

MacDonnell frowned for a moment, then drummed his fingers together. “I’ll tell you a story. When I was a boy, I was cruel and proud. I was the son of a warrior lord. I knew who I was. I knew what I had coming to me.” Lord MacDonnell’s gaze was far away. “I dreamed of the animal I would summon to be my spirit animal. The North is full of animals that would increase my glory. And yet, when my summoning ceremony happened, I didn’t call a hound or a horse or even a fighting badger. I called a hare.”

Meilin remembered her own Nectar Ceremony. She had been so stunned and disappointed to see a panda instead of a more agile animal.

“I was furious,” Lord MacDonnell recalled. “A hare! An overgrown rabbit!” Now he ducked his head, and Meilin realized that his expression was one of shame. He had to consider for a long time before he could continue. “I tormented my spirit animal. At best I dismissed him. At worst I taunted him. I knew I was being terrible, but I didn’t care. Part of me wanted him to lash back at me. To prove his mettle. But he was loyal to a fault — he swallowed my harsh words and did my bidding like a servant rather than a spirit animal.

“One morning, I woke and he was gone. I had driven my spirit animal away.” Lord MacDonnell closed his eyes. “Since then, there is a hole in my heart that nothing can fill. All joys and entertainments seem empty, and I’ll never know what the hare and I might have accomplished together. I am going through the motions of leading my people, but nothing truly matters to me. I’m a shell. A creature that was Lord MacDonnell.”

I will never let that happen to Jhi and me, Meilin vowed. I must treat her better.

“But part of being a leader,” MacDonnell said, straightening a bit, “is thinking about what you want in the future, not what you wanted in the past.” He motioned to the chessboard. “This game teaches that strategy. I train my

men to be masters of it, so they might succeed where I have failed.”

“Chess?” Rollan scoffed. “All chess ever taught me is that I should always play cards.”

MacDonnell ignored this and turned to Conor. “Play a round with me?”

Conor’s head jerked up, utterly horrified. He stammered, “Oh, I don’t . . . I’m not really good at chess.”

Lord MacDonnell was already pulling out a chair at one of the unoccupied chess tables. He arranged his kilt all around the chair so that nothing too embarrassing was showing. “As I said, Briggan is a great leader. And this game is a lesson all leaders should learn.”

Meilin, not at all convinced, offered, “You can do it.” But she was thinking: *Not him!* Conor was the least schooled of any of them, except for maybe Rollan. And at least Rollan had street smarts. What had Conor ever learned of strategy and leadership in a sheep pasture? He was going to blow their chance to hunt Rumfuss.

“You summoned Briggan, Conor. That means your destiny *demands* that you become a great leader,” Lord MacDonnell said. “Begin.”

Conor moved a pawn across the beautifully painted chessboard. Lord MacDonnell charged out with a knight. Conor inched out another pawn. Two moves later, one of his pieces fell to Lord MacDonnell. Conor slid his queen out to defend himself. Lord MacDonnell peacefully murdered one of Conor’s bishops. Conor threw more pieces in the direction of

Lord MacDonnell's king. Lord MacDonnell took several more victims.

Just like that, it was over. Lord MacDonnell checkmated Conor's king. He stood up.

"Not quite, Conor," he said.

I knew it, Meilin thought miserably. I could have done this with my eyes shut! What is the point of being on a team if you are the strongest one?

"Please, my lord," Meilin broke in. "We desperately need to speak to Rumfuss. If I could —"

"No," Lord MacDonnell said. "Do not ask me again today."

Just then, Finn burst from the fortress onto the grass of the courtyard. To Meilin's surprise, he didn't have Abeke with him. Instead, he had that absolutely ridiculous black cat, Kunaya.

"Abeke is gone," Finn said. "All I could find was the cat."

Meilin snapped, "I knew it!"

"Look," Finn interrupted. He touched the cat's neck. A piece of string was tied around it — no, not string. Abeke's elephant hair bracelet. Several frantic knots were tied along its length. "A message."

"What does it say?" Conor asked.

Finn's face was serious. "'Help.' And then: 'Devin hunts Rumfuss.'"

HUNTING

“H*E HUNTS?*” MACDONNELL ASKED, VOICE CURIOUS, LIKE HE thought he’d misheard the punch line of a joke. Finn repeated what the knot code said. MacDonnell’s face didn’t change, but when he spoke again, his voice had gone dark. “Hunting. In my castle’s gardens, where I alone am permitted to hunt.” He pursed his lips. “They take advantage of my hospitality and break my law.”

“And they have Abeke!” Rollan added, irritated that MacDonnell seemed to find hunting more offensive than kidnapping. He turned to the others. “Why are we standing here? We’ve got to help her.”

“I’m certainly not allowing *more* people to break my law and hunt on my land,” MacDonnell said, as if this should have been obvious. “My soldiers will stop them. Trunswick won’t be allowed to leave Glengavin.”

“He has the wildcat,” Finn said quietly. “Even if you manage to take him, it won’t be without significant losses to

your soldiers.” He motioned to the soldiers, who were pretending not to eavesdrop, though they were doing a terrible job — in his distraction, one soldier had knitted his sleeve into the Highland cow’s hair.

MacDonnell, who had already lifted his hands to clap and signal his soldiers, hesitated.

“You wouldn’t want to be down men, should you have to defend Glengavin from the Conquerors, sir,” Conor said, then reached down to the chessboard. He put his fingertip on MacDonnell’s king piece and slid it toward MacDonnell himself.

MacDonnell took a deep breath, one that seemed to make his already broad shoulders even broader. “A wise move, Conor — Briggan is indeed making you a good leader, even if you aren’t a good chess player. But what will my people think, if I allow you and your friends to break my law?”

“What if we did you some sort of favor in return for permission to break the law? A — a boon?” Conor said.

“Such as?” MacDonnell asked, and Conor furrowed his eyebrows in thought. “I have no need for your money —”

“The hare,” Meilin said, stepping forward. “What if we find your spirit animal?”

“The hare for Devin Trunswick and Rumfuss?”

MacDonnell’s eyes widened. “Deal. But I warn you — he’s not a friendly boar. Even if you find him, I doubt he will speak to you. You may arm yourselves from my stock, just in case.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Rollan said. He spun around. “Hey, can I borrow this?” he asked, diving toward the soldier knitted to the cow. He grabbed the soldier’s sword; when the soldier moved to stop him, the cow mooed irritably and shuffled away, dragging the man with him.

MacDonnell, who looked a bit overcome with the prospect of the hare returning to him, had a soldier lead them through the palace and down a wide staircase to the gardens. As they came into view, Rollan had to hide his surprise. When Rollan thought of gardens, he thought of little patches of grass with flowers. Maybe a fountain. Maybe even a tree, if it was a really fancy sort of garden. And what lay before him was exactly those things — except times a thousandfold.

The gardens stretched out toward the horizon. The section farthest away was a swath of gray almost the same color as the late morning sky. Somewhere was the wall that kept Rumfuss contained — but Rollan certainly couldn’t see it among the thick trees, climbing vines, and flower beds so ruffled and colorful they looked like ladies’ dresses cascading from their boxes.

“All right, what’s first?” Rollan asked. “The hare, Abeke, or Rumfuss?”

“I had a dream about the hare,” Conor said. “I think I know where he is. Finn, come with me, we’ll go after the hare. Meilin and Rollan, you guys go find Abeke.”



After Conor and Finn had hurried into the garden in search of the hare, leaving Rollan and Meilin on the steps, the two began searching the perimeter of the castle for Abeke.

Meilin was already clacking around with plans and possibilities. “There’s no place to keep Abeke locked up in a garden, is there? She has to be inside somewhere.”

“Surely not in their rooms — even Devin Trunswick isn’t that stupid,” Rollan said.

Kunaya wrapped herself around Meilin’s legs several times. Meilin looked down, clearly annoyed at the distraction. “Maybe a closet? Or another guest room? I wish every door in this castle wasn’t closed — Kunaya, stop rubbing on me!”

Kunaya bit Meilin on the leg, an action that made Meilin hiss and Rollan grin.

“You ridiculous *cat!*” Meilin snapped.

Suddenly Rollan felt a flash of intuition so strong that he knew Essix must be near. He said, “What if she’s not just a ridiculous cat? Kunaya was the last one to see Abeke.”

“Follow a cat?” Meilin said. “That is the stupidest idea you’ve ever had.”

Rollan said, “Oh, trust me, it is not. Let’s go.”

He started after Kunaya, and the little cat, looking pleased that they understood the game, bounded down the path ahead of them.

They rounded the corner of the castle. The carriage house came into view, a small but tidy building with a thatched roof. Kunaya shot into the dim interior, where carriages were

lined up. The cat wove around the wheels, a blur of motion, ever faster. Meilin and Rollan had to hurry to keep up with her.

And then she stopped. With her tail crooked into a curl, she meowed smugly.

“Kunaya?” a voice called out, sounding just a little tearful.

Abeke! Rollan was stunned, even though the suggestion to follow the cat had been his. He vowed to make sure that Kunaya got a cat banquet thrown for her when this was all over.

He ran to one side of the carriage; Meilin ran to the other. Resting in the center of the carriage’s floorboard was a massive wooden trunk with a heavy lock.

Meilin leaned over the edge of the door. “*Abeke!* We’re here to save you!”

“Meilin?” Abeke’s startled voice came from inside the trunk. “Is that *you?*”

“And Rollan is here too,” Rollan said indignantly.

“I didn’t think anyone would find me!” Abeke cried, her voice muffled. “I managed to knot my bracelet onto Kunaya, but I ran out of cord before I could spell out where —”

“Great story,” said Rollan. “Tell us later. After we get you out.”

He grabbed ahold of the lock on the trunk and gave it a tug. Frowning at Meilin, he shook his head.

Meilin pursed her lips. “Perhaps there’s a spare key? Or — I bet Jhi could crush this entire thing if she sat on it!”

“Jhi is going to *sit on me?*” Abeke cried, voice panicked.

“Well, the trunk, not —”

“Jhi isn’t sitting on anyone,” Rollan said calmly.

Clambering up on the carriage back, he grabbed for the canopy. It ripped easily, and with it came the thin pieces of metal that gave the canopy its shape. In a heartbeat, Rollan had pulled one from the fabric. He jammed it into the trunk’s lock and wiggled it around in a practiced way. Looking over his shoulder at Meilin, he grinned cheekily.

“What?” she said, flushing. “What are you smiling at me for? The lock —”

“What lock?” Rollan said. At that instant he twisted his makeshift pick a final time. The lock popped open and clattered to the ground.

Never has a poorly spent childhood paid off so well,
Rollan thought with satisfaction.

Meilin laughed, a bright, honest sound that she swallowed as soon as she realized he had noticed it.

“Let me guess,” Meilin said. “Tutors?”

Rollan grinned.

In the carriage, the trunk’s lid flew open. Abeke and Uraza leaped out in motions so identical they looked like two of the same animal rather than one human and one leopard.

“How did you find me?” Abeke asked breathlessly.

“Kunaya’s not a spirit animal,” Meilin answered, looking down at the cat, “but she’s still a pretty great beast.” Meilin tugged the bracelet off Kunaya’s head and held it out to Abeke.

“Have Devin and Karmo found Rumfuss?” Abeke asked as she took the bracelet from Meilin and put it back on her wrist. “They’ve been looking for hours now!”

“I don’t think so,” Rollan said. “We can still find him before they do. Although I don’t have a clue where to look. What do boars like? Mud?”

Meilin and Abeke exchanged a look of exasperation.

“We could go ask MacDonnell?” Abeke suggested.

“By the time we find *him* and then look for Rumfuss —” Meilin began.

She was cut off by a sharp cry from the top of a nearby carriage. Essix was perched on a driver’s seat. When she caught Rollan’s surprised look, she cocked her head as if to say, *What? I showed up, didn’t I?*

“What is she trying to say, Rollan?” Meilin asked.

Rollan muttered, “Like I would know.”

But the falcon ruffled her feathers at him and cocked her head. He felt the familiar sensation of her intuition trickling into his own mind. *If it was like this all the time*, he thought, *things would be a lot easier.*

Meilin and Abeke were waiting for his verdict.

“Essix is the answer,” he said. “She can guide us from above. Come on!”

THE HARE

*/*HOPE THEY'VE FOUND ABEKE, CONOR THOUGHT AS HE AND Finn rushed down a path that snaked along the castle's east wall. Their search for the hare had consumed more time than Conor liked, and still they'd seen no sign of their friends. Around them, the garden darkened as morning faded into afternoon, and afternoon into late afternoon. Losing the talisman to Devin would be awful, but losing another one of their team after Tarik . . . it would be unthinkable. Briggan glanced over at Conor, as if he'd overheard the boy's thoughts.

"Convincing the hare to rejoin MacDonnell won't be easy," Finn said from behind them, startling Conor back to the moment. "Not after the way MacDonnell treated him."

"Remember Rollan's horse when we left Greenhaven?" Conor said, looking back at him. "He used to be a spirit animal. He was jealous of Rollan and Essix's bond. Maybe

when the hare sees Briggan and me, he'll be jealous — jealous enough to want his bond with MacDonnell back."

"Maybe so," Finn said. "I know that / find your bond inspiring."

It was high praise coming from the quiet Greencloak, and Conor felt a surge of hope too. They pressed on. Then, suddenly, there it was: a curtain of wisteria.

This was in my dream, Conor thought.

He dove for it, pushing the cascade of purple flowers out of the way. Beside him, Briggan snorted and rubbed his nose against the ground, protesting the flowers' overpowering scent.

The three emerged in a small clearing of trees. There was a stone bench on one side; on the other, the castle's stone wall. The branches arched overhead, leaving only a tiny circle of the darkening sky visible.

Finn made an uncertain noise. "The horse's partner died," he reminded Conor. "He had no choice but to go on alone. The hare knows MacDonnell is still alive — what makes you think he misses the bond so much?"

Conor took a deep breath before stepping toward the castle wall. He extended a hand to a rosebush planted alongside the stone.

"Because," he said. "Do you know what's on the other side of this wall?"

"I don't," Finn admitted, voice cautious.

"It's MacDonnell's bedroom," Conor said. Careful to avoid the thorns, he brushed the rosebush to one side.

With a soft whine, Briggan lay down. Finn sucked in a sharp breath. In the dark, two tiny, beetle-colored eyes shone, peering up at Conor. The hare had clearly been sleeping, curled up in a ball in the soft dirt. He looked surprised to see someone, much less someone so clearly looking for *him*.

"Hello," Conor said gently. "I'm Conor, and this is Briggan, one of the Great Beasts. We're, uh, hoping to convince you to return to Lord MacDonnell."

The hare blinked. He did not look convinced. His ears sagged — not so much sleepy as hopeless.

Conor wished he'd worked out more to say. He had really just thought the invitation, combined with the image of Briggan and him together, would be enough.

Behind him, however, Finn exhaled before speaking. "I know what it is to lose your spirit animal. The pain I feel, I see in Lord MacDonnell's eyes. I see in *your* eyes."

The hare blinked again, his ears sagging further.

"Please," Conor said. "Come with us. Come back to Glengavin. Give MacDonnell another chance. I know you miss him. You sleep beneath his bedroom window."

"He wants you back," Finn added. "He's changed."

This time, the hare did not blink. He sat still, his giant front legs locked in place. Only his nose moved, twitching with each breath. They were so close. Once they had convinced the hare to go back to MacDonnell, they could concentrate on Rumfuss. Time was running out. Conor

finally reached toward the hare, palm open and promising, growing closer, closer to the animal —

The hare bolted, gone so fast into the underbrush that even Briggan couldn't have outrun him. It would be impossible to find him in this huge, dark garden.

"Well," Finn said, sounding defeated. "There goes that."

Conor gritted his teeth. Why had he reached out? He should have been more patient, given the animal more time. He was a shepherd — he knew better than to rush an animal slow to trust.

Well, he reminded himself glumly. *You were a shepherd.*

Finn lifted a hand to touch a spot on his bicep — where his spirit animal, whatever it was, stayed dormant. "Perhaps sometimes a relationship is just too broken to fix."

Briggan walked to Conor's side and sat down, letting Conor run a hand over his fur for comfort. As soon as his hand came down on Briggan's ruff, he felt something shift in his head. His mind cleared, and the feeling of hopelessness that was threatening to overpower him was washed away. He had to lead. He had to make a decision.

"We can at least stop Devin from getting the talisman, even if MacDonnell won't let us take it for the Greencloaks," he told Finn. "Let's go find Rumfuss."

RUMFUSS

AFTER A FLYOVER OF THE GARDEN, ESSIX WAS ABLE TO GUIDE Rollan and the others toward the fruit orchards. The journey had taken the remainder of the day, but finally Essix had landed in the branches of a thick apple tree, and seemed to announce with a churr that they were close. Now, Meilin, Abeke, and Rollan hid in the shadow beside the apple tree, while Uraza peered across the orchard from the tree's branches itself. Abeke was impressed — perhaps Rollan and Essix really were working on their bond.

"My legs are cramping," Rollan complained. "Let's keep looking somewhere else."

Abeke looked up at Uraza, whose lavender eyes met hers with disappointment. Leaving Kunaya sitting in the tree, Uraza slunk down to join the rest of them. Her movement caused a few apples to shake loose, one of which knocked Meilin on the head. She caught it on the bounce and held it up to the leopard accusingly.

“Sorry,” Abeke said for Uraza.

Meilin looked irritated for a moment, then tossed the apple into the darkness. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s go —”

Meilin didn’t finish her sentence, because Rollan had grabbed her arm in an uncharacteristically serious way. Essix, who was perched on his shoulder, stared in the same direction — the area where Meilin had thrown the apple. It was through grapevines and fruit trees, a part of the orchards that seemed more wild than the rest of the garden.

Under his breath, Rollan said, “It’s too dark and there’s all that stuff in the way. But I think it’s Rumfuss.”

Meilin started in that direction. “Well, let’s go.”

“Wait,” Rollan said, snagging her cloak. “Do you really think we should just go blowing over there like a hurricane? He might run, or worse. Remember Arax?”

Abeke shuddered. The image of the gigantic ram bearing down on her would be with her for the rest of her life.

“If you were Rumfuss and crazy MacDonnell had locked you up in his garden, would you be excited about talking to humans?” Rollan continued.

“Well . . .” Abeke said as her gaze landed on Uraza. “Who better to approach one of the Great Beasts than fellow Great Beasts? Uraza, could you go see Rumfuss?”

Uraza’s ears tilted forward and she sat down, tail twitching behind her. Rollan gave Essix a nervous look, but the falcon made a soft clicking sound and jumped to the nearest branch. Meilin held out her arm and Jhi tumbled out, crunching loudly onto the ground. Everyone cringed as

Rollan peered back through the trees to make certain the noise hadn't sent Rumfuss running.

"All right," Rollan said. "Good luck, guys."

Uraza was the first to go, letting her tail swing playfully in Abeke's face as she walked off. She was every bit as silent on the ground as Essix was in the air. Jhi took a step forward —

"Maybe wait a moment?" Meilin said, putting an arm in front of the panda. The panda obliged, giving Uraza and Essix time to reach Rumfuss before she started off. Jhi rumbled off into the trees, crushing leaves and sticks under her heavy paws. When Abeke could no longer see the bright white bits of Jhi's fur, she worriedly rubbed the spot on her arm where Uraza usually waited in her dormant state.

A growl came from the trees, then a falcon's cry. There was then a huge, roaring sort of noise, almost human in its expressiveness — the boar. None of the noises were sounds of alarm, but it still made Abeke's eyes widen.

Funny, she thought. A few months ago I'd never even met Uraza. Now I'm nervous when I lose sight of her.

"Oh!" Meilin said, reaching forward and touching her temple. "We . . . we can go speak to Rumfuss now."

"Jhi told you that?" Rollan asked, sounding impressed.

Meilin shrugged. "Not told, exactly. But I felt calmness. Safety."

They crept through the trees — despite Meilin's spirit animal, she was able to go rather quietly, though it was Abeke who truly moved like the leopard without even trying.

Suddenly they broke through the darkened area into a copse of peach trees. Light now poured down from the heavy moon, so Abeke could see Rumfuss clearly. Perhaps *too* clearly.

Abeke thought Arax the Ram was rather frightening, but he was nothing compared to Rumfuss. The boar was more than twice her height and had narrow, dark eyes. His hide looked more like armor than skin, and the hair that jutted out from either cheek looked like it would cut her hand if she touched it. Most dangerous looking, however, were the two thick tusks on either side of his snout. They gleamed yellow-white and looked like the sharp corners of two glowing stars. Several huge mounds of chewed apples, each as tall as Abeke, surrounded him on all sides.

Rumfuss grunted, stamped at the ground, and then he spoke with a resonant voice that seemed to boom from both inside and outside Abeke. "You . . . want?"

His words were filled with the hesitation of someone who does not speak a language fluently. Abeke thought it had probably been a long time since he'd spoken to any humans.

"Rumfuss," she said politely. "We seek your talisman — the Iron Boar. We need it to defeat the Devourer."

"Talisman?" Rumfuss grunted warily. He flicked his tail back and forth, the bundle of hairs on the end whishing at his legs. "Why . . . give it to you?"

"The Conquerors will come for it otherwise," Meilin spoke up. "They've already taken my country, Zhong. And they've

taken over Trunswick. *And* two Conqueror recruits are here, in this garden, looking for you — for the talisman.”

“Can . . . handle . . . recruits,” Rumfuss said. Abeke didn’t doubt that he’d be a match for Devin and Karmo, even with their powerful spirit animals.

“We still need the talisman, though,” Abeke pleaded. “We can’t handle the Conquerors on our own.”

“In return?” Rumfuss grunted.

“Um . . .” Abeke frowned. She looked to Meilin, who was equally lost.

“Freedom,” Rollan said. They turned to look at him. He was leaning against one of the peach tree’s branches, arms slung across it casually. He lifted his eyebrows at the girls. “That’s what anyone who’s in a cage wants most, no matter how big the cage is. Right, Rumfuss?”

The boar stamped the ground and nodded his head; Rollan smiled a bit in understanding.

“Wall,” Rumfuss said, turning his head and jutting his snout toward the edge of the peach trees. There was indeed an immense stone wall, which rose up high above even the Great Beast’s head. With all its jutting stones, it would have been nothing for an animal like Uraza to escape, but for a creature more lumbering, even one as huge as Rumfuss, it might as well have been a thousand feet tall.

“Not so fast,” a voice jolted through the dark. A voice Abeke knew. A voice she knew too well.

They whirled around. Uraza hunched and hissed, showing her impressive teeth. Rumfuss stamped the ground and

gave a throaty, rolling growl. Even Jhi hunched forward and flexed her muscles.

“What a reception,” Devin said, grinning like this was all a fantastic game. “Abeke! I see you managed to escape. My own fault — I always underestimate how wily vermin can be when they’re cornered.” Karmo, standing beside Devin, looked sour at the joke, though Devin snickered hard at his own genius.

“Rumfuss, we’re going to need that talisman,” Devin continued. He whistled sharply; the wildcat appeared at his side. Karmo’s hammerkop flapped out from the trees, thick bill open and menacing.

Rumfuss looked unimpressed — and Abeke couldn’t blame him. The three of them, their spirit animals, and Rumfuss the Great Beast against Devin and Karmo? They could handle this.

But then Devin grinned even wider, and whistled again. Now the trees were alive with footsteps, footsteps of all sizes, skittering sounds, crunching sounds, the sounds of hooves and paws and human feet on the ground. Conquerors — a dozen or more, and all with spirit animals — poured from the foliage. There was a man with an iguana around his shoulders, and another with a meerkat crouched at his feet. There was a giraffe, a lemur, and a bobcat, each paired with a human who looked armed and ready for combat.

Devin had snuck Conquerors into Glengavin.

“Well, Rumfuss? The Iron Boar Talisman?” Devin said, holding out his hand.

Rumfuss studied Devin for a moment, so long a moment that Abeke began to worry he was going to give in. But then the boar lowered his head. He huffed, nostrils flaring, and his hackles lifted.

Then he charged.

BATTLE

“| HEAR THE OTHERS! THEY’RE UP AHEAD!” CONOR SHOUTED back to Finn. Briggan was in the lead and howled as he blasted through the orchard, leaping over grapevines and dodging tree trunks. Conor wasn’t exactly sure who *they* were just yet — but he knew they were either *in* trouble or they *were* trouble. Animal sounds rose up like a storm in the night — roars, chirps, growls, snarls, hoots, and cries. Overhead, a falcon shrieked.

“That’s Essix!” Finn shouted.

Conor’s heart thrummed frantically. Briggan howled again, guiding them through the vines, until . . .

Conor’s pounding heart stopped instead.

Conquerors. Spirit animals. A boar as large as a carriage — that *had* to be Rumfuss. And in the middle of it all, Abeke, Meilin, and Rollan. Abeke and Uraza worked as a team, bounding off trees and tackling their opponents. Uraza knocked them down, with Abeke moving quickly behind her

to fling the smaller spirit animals away and deliver a few well-placed kicks to her downed opponents' ribs. Jhi was safely in passive state, a tattoo on the same arm Meilin used to box a Conqueror in the nose. Rollan dove under arms and ducked through legs like someone with a bit of practice at evading authority.

"Conor!" Meilin cried desperately, somehow seeing him between Conquerors. Saying his name took Meilin's concentration away for a heartbeat too long — a macaw swooped down and blinded her with scarlet feathers and claws. It gave a nearby enemy enough time to grab her by the leg and pull her down.

"Briggan!" Conor shouted to the wolf, who darted into the crowd and heaved the Conqueror off Meilin. Another one, however, took his place in an instant — there were too many. Far too many.

A bobcat leaped for Conor's face; he threw his staff into the air just in time to knock it away. He bashed it a second time in the head, rendering it unconscious, then ran forward, staff held horizontal so that it crashed into the backs of a few unsuspecting Conquerors. A baboon grabbed hold of his arm, yanking him down so hard Conor thought he might have dislocated his shoulder. Wincing through the pain, Conor whirled around and punched it squarely in the face. Rollan was suddenly there, offering him a hand up, but he'd no sooner found his feet than he realized a group of Conquerors were surrounding the two of them.

“Any ideas?” Rollan said. Essix swooped down, clawing at the eyes of a few Conquerors, but it wasn’t enough to stop the horde. Briggan was still helping Meilin; Uraza and Abeke were being forced farther and farther into the orchard. Conor gripped his staff; Rollan, his sword.

Suddenly a pile of men were lifted into the air with a chorus of screams — Rumfuss! The boar smashed through them, sending fur and bodies flying. Conor wanted to pause and marvel at his size and strength, but there was no time. He spun forward, bringing the staff down hard on a nearby Conqueror’s head.

Conor turned to see who needed help; there were still so many enemies, at least another half dozen, and mostly the ones with the sizable spirit animals. Meilin leaped from a branch and, midair, released Jhi from passive form. The panda slammed to the ground, butt-first, crushing a woman beneath her, and then in a flash was back to being a tattoo on Meilin’s arm. Finn was by her, fending off a man with a giraffe who used its muscled neck like a battering ram —

Conor suddenly felt the unmistakable pain of teeth slicing into his shoulder. Devin’s black wildcat had leaped on him from behind. Its claws and teeth were tearing into Conor’s skin. He couldn’t stop himself from screaming in pain, and turned in a wide circle, flinging the beast off. Conor grabbed his shoulder, and his hand came away sticky with blood.

“Not so great now, are you?” Devin hissed at him, and stalked forward. He tilted his head toward the wildcat, who raced back to him and threaded herself around his legs.

Devin started forward; Conor lifted his staff but winced. He couldn't hold its weight with his injuries.

"You thought you were so special, didn't you, Conor? You thought you were better than me. You thought Briggan made you greater. Briggan's just a shadow of the Great Beast he used to be. Elda, however, is still a legend."

Conor backed up; strong hands grabbed his shoulders — a Conqueror. The man dug his fingers into Conor's fresh wound until he shrieked in pain. *Briggan, I need you*, he thought desperately.

Then he saw the wolf. Briggan was being held down by several Conquerors, one of whom kicked him sharply in the stomach. Briggan yelped loudly, and Conor could feel the noise in his skull.

Seeing this, Devin snorted. "Great Beast? Sure." He turned back to Conor. "Elda. Take him down."

Conor closed his eyes, but then immediately opened them again — he was scared, but he wasn't going to face his death with his eyes shut. Elda yowled, deep, sharp, and rumbling, and sprang forward.

Something else grabbed the wildcat in midair, crushing her to the ground. Something sleek and black, almost like a shadow rather than an animal. It bounded away quickly. Elda didn't get up, but her chest continued to rise and fall weakly. Devin's eyes widened and he rushed to her side. With a flash, she disappeared into a tattoo on his arm. The Conqueror holding Conor's shoulders released him, drawing a knife to fight off whatever this new creature was. But the

animal was too fast — it pounced on the man, slashing his neck with what must be massive teeth. Then it shot off toward Meilin and Finn.

Devin was roaring angrily, shouting at the others. Karmo, who had been fighting Abeke, turned to look — just long enough for Rollan to tackle him to the ground and then hold him at swordpoint. Abeke dove for the hammerkop, which narrowly avoided her grasp and flapped for the trees. Conor ran for Briggan and shoved his staff deep into the stomach of the man kicking *his* wolf. It gave Briggan just enough time to bound to his feet and leap back into action.

The Conquerors were realizing how dangerously low their numbers had fallen — three left, no, two, since Rumfuss had just tossed one over the wall.

The dark shape, still moving too fast for Conor to see clearly, pounced on another man. Finn tossed his blade to Meilin, who held it aloft toward the final Conqueror. The man looked at her, then at the others. He then turned and fled.

“Coward!” Devin screamed. “Come back and fight!”

It was not very wise for Devin to draw attention to himself — Uraza heard him. She bounded across the orchard and pounced, slamming Devin into the ground with her front paws. She bared her teeth at the boy, flexing her claws out so that they pricked Devin’s shoulders.

“Is everyone all right?” Conor finally asked, panting.

“I’m fine,” Abeke said. “Just hold him there, Uraza —”

“Get your stupid cat off me!” Devin barked.

Abeke shook her head. "Never mind, Uraza. You can eat him."

This shut Devin up, at least for a few moments, while the others called out. Meilin had a bad cut on her arm, and maybe some broken toes. Essix was missing more than a few tail feathers, and it was making her fly all wobbly. Rollan had a black eye, though Karmo, lying on the ground with his palms up in surrender, had two.

They'd survived. Not only survived . . . they'd won. Conor could scarcely believe it.

And Finn — where was he?

"Finn?" Conor called out. "Where'd he go?"

"He was just here!" Meilin said, looking around in a panic.

"I'm fine," Finn said. His voice was hushed and thick with awe. It took them a few moments to work out where it was coming from. When they did, their jaws dropped in unison.

"Finn!" Abeke finally said. "It's you!"

Finn smiled, really smiled, his face bright and open. Conor couldn't remember him ever smiling before. The Greencloak lowered his arm and ran it along the back of a spirit animal — *his* spirit animal — who stood by his feet. He touched the creature with nervous, shaking hands, like he was very afraid this was just a dream.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Meilin asked wonderously.

"I thought he was gone," Finn said. "I thought he didn't want me anymore." His spirit animal looked up at him, then forced his head into Finn's hand, nuzzling at him. He was

beautiful — ink black, with even blacker spots that glowed in the moonlight.

A black wildcat.

BLACK WILDCAT

FINN WAS THE BOY FROM THE NORTH, THE LEGEND DEVIN only pretended to be. Abeke laughed loudly in shock, Meilin stared, and Rollan scoffed and shook his head like he still didn't quite believe it. Even Rumfuss looked impressed.

"The bond . . . never lost," Rumfuss said, so wisely that it was hard to think less of him when he dropped his head and ate a mostly rotten apple from the ground.

"Rumfuss," Conor said. The boar looked up, and Conor dropped his head with respect. "Thank you for fighting with us."

"Thank you," Rumfuss said roughly, "for . . . fighting for me." The boar paused for a moment, then also dropped his head to the ground. At first Conor presumed it was to eat another piece of fallen fruit. Instead, the boar dug his massive tusk into the dirt of the nearest tree. It only took him a few moments to emerge with something hanging from it.

“Is that —” Abeke began.

“The talisman?” Conor finished.

“Here,” Rumfuss said, stretching his neck out. Conor reached forward and took the pendant from the boar’s shining tusk, his muscles tensing at the animal’s smoky breath on his forearm. The talisman — the Iron Boar — was very heavy, and a deep rust color similar to Rumfuss’s hide. It was shaped like a boar, of course, and while Conor couldn’t be certain, he suspected the miniature boar’s tusks were made from bits of Rumfuss’s full-sized ones. They were too perfect not to be.

“Thank you,” Conor said. “Thank you so much.” He slipped the talisman around his neck and turned to the others. Karmo rose, still at Rollan’s swordpoint. Uraza reluctantly got off Devin, though Meilin was quick to brandish her own dagger right under his chin.

“Wait,” Rollan said. “Rumfuss. We promised to free him for the talisman.”

“I will . . . be fine,” Rumfuss snorted, but Rollan shook his head.

“We’ve got to get him out of here,” he said. He turned to Rumfuss. “Come with us. We’ll tell MacDonnell how you fought off Conquerors on his grounds. He’ll owe you a favor.”

“Hopefully that favor will work for the rest of us too, because we don’t have the hare,” Conor said.

“Hare?” Rumfuss asked.

“MacDonnell’s lost spirit animal. He ran off before Finn and I could convince him to return. What do you think MacDonnell will care about more — that we didn’t hold up our end of the bargain, or that we stopped his castle from being invaded?”

No one answered. It was hard to tell with someone like MacDonnell. Conor tucked the talisman under his shirt. With a resigned sigh, he led the others back through the orchard groves, toward the castle. The trek back through the massive gardens took nearly as long as it had to find the boar. Rumfuss followed, uprooting entire trees when they got in his way rather than walking around them. The two prisoners sulked silently the whole way — or rather, silently until either Rollan or Meilin poked them a bit too hard with the tips of their blades.

They arrived back at the garden steps to see most of the castle staff waiting for them. The night sky was already brightening. Rumfuss had elected to wait within the boundary of the tree line. MacDonnell and his children stood ahead of the others.

“Kindly tell me, what sounded like a *war* going on in my garden?” MacDonnell barked at them, motioning toward the orchards.

“It was a war. Well, a battle, I guess. But it sure felt like a war,” Rollan said, and Karmo made a sound of agreement.

“Lord MacDonnell,” Finn said. “Devin and Karmo allowed other Conquerors onto your grounds to help them capture Rumfuss the Boar and take his talisman.”

MacDonnell's eyes widened, and a vein on his forehead began to pulsate. Seeing this, his children stepped away. "You mean to tell me, these two not only insulted my hospitality . . . they *invaded* my home?"

"We didn't invade —"

"Silence!" MacDonnell roared. "Guards! Relieve me of the burden of Devin Trunswick's presence. Lock up him and his companion immediately. And force Devin to call his spirit animal into its passive state."

"It is in its passive state, sir," Conor said shyly. "*This* wildcat belongs to Finn."

Now all attention shot to Finn, and a ripple of shock and awe raced through the crowd. Even MacDonnell's lips parted in wonder as Finn stepped forward, his wildcat, Donn, moving regally beside him. Donn made Elda look like a kitten. He was all muscle, with eyes as bright and yellow as the sun reflected off water. His black fur was dark velvet.

"The wildcat? The one from the legends? That means . . . you . . ." MacDonnell said, lifting his eyes to Finn. Suddenly MacDonnell was laughing, voice booming. "The true legend! In my home! I knew it couldn't be that snub-nosed Trunswick child!"

Finn bowed a bit, though he seemed rather bashful of the attention. Conor could relate. As the tittering and excitement died down, Finn cleared his throat. "My lord, we did not stop the Conquerors on our own. We were assisted by none other than Rumfuss, the Great Beast."

At this, Rumfuss, who had been mostly lurking in the shadows of the garden, stepped ever so slightly into the dwindling moonlight. The sheer size of him was obvious, even from this glimpse. The boar's eyes landed hard upon Lord MacDonnell. A hush fell over the assembled crowd; a few people went indoors, wary of Rumfuss's ferocity. Conor found himself wondering for the first time just how the Great Beast had ended up within these walls. A story for another time, perhaps.

"It would be very honorable, sir," Conor added, "for you to release him from captivity, in return for his heroics."

MacDonnell paused. He puffed up his shoulders a bit, and somehow managed to look nearly as large as Rumfuss. "The deal, if I recall, was my hare for Rumfuss and his talisman. I cannot allow lawbreakers to simply suggest new laws for their own convenience."

"Oh, come on!" Rollan snapped. "You'd be overrun with Conquerors right now!"

"My castle, my law!" MacDonnell barked, and there was a buzz of agreement among the crowd, though Conor suspected this was merely because no one wanted to disagree with a man like MacDonnell. He shook his head, furious with himself for not convincing the hare sooner.

Behind him, Rumfuss made a deep sound in his throat, one that was loud but strangely gentle, almost like a cat purring. Rumfuss inclined his large head, indicating over his shoulder with a perfect tusk, then stamped a foot on the ground softly.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd. MacDonnell's face paled and, even from afar, Conor could see his lower lip was trembling.

It was the hare. It hopped from behind Rumfuss slowly, cautiously. Rumfuss looked down at the hare, who peered back up at him. They were speaking, though whatever they were saying was beyond any of the humans present. The hare now turned and looked up at MacDonnell, who sank to his knees in one swift motion. The sight of the great Lord MacDonnell in such a position sent a chorus of gasps from the assembled servants.

Rumfuss looked up at MacDonnell. "Say . . . sorry."

"I'm sorry," MacDonnell said immediately. "I'm so very sorry."

"Say . . . never again."

"Never again!" MacDonnell said, voice pleading.

"Say . . . you want."

"What?"

"I think the hare wants to know you want him," Meilin said. She wore a pained expression that Conor couldn't quite figure out. "That you are satisfied with him."

"I do! I am!" MacDonnell bellowed. With this, the hare sprang forward. MacDonnell's face spread into a wide, teary grin as the hare leaped into the air and, with a flash, disappeared — only to reappear as a tattoo on the man's forearm. MacDonnell rose, tears falling freely, and placed a hand over the hare tattoo, like he was afraid it would melt away.

“You’re free!” he called out to Rumfuss. “Free! I should never have locked you up. You have my gratitude and my apologies, Rumfuss. I beg you to forgive me.”

Rumfuss didn’t seem quite ready for forgiveness, but he patiently followed the guards around the edge of the castle. Then, when the gates had finally opened, he was patient no more. There was a sound that seemed to shake the entire castle, and suddenly the only Great Beasts left in the garden were the ones that had come with them.

IRON BOAR

WHILE MACDONNELL WOULD HAVE BEEN HAPPY TO HOUSE the Greencloaks as esteemed guests for another night, Finn had insisted time was of the essence. Though Rollan loudly protested — the boy had only slept a single night in that amazing bed — their group set off that very morning. Understandably, they bypassed Trunswick entirely, shaving several days off the return trip to Lady Evelyn's. There they found a rather embarrassed Tarik, much improved from his previous condition. He was tired, but healthy enough to travel with them the relatively short way back to Greenhaven Castle.

Finn, however, would not be going with them. After a hushed and intense conversation, Tarik returned to the group and announced that he would ask Olvan's permission for Finn to remain at Glengavin. Finn would act as a much-needed emissary for the Greencloaks in the North. He was, after all, supposed to be their long-awaited hero. It took a

little convincing that the group wouldn't need his protection on the way back — Tarik was clearly not yet at full strength — but Rollan's enthusiastic and animated retelling of the battle in the apple orchard reminded the older Greencloaks that the Four Fallen had learned a lot on this trip.

Still, they were glad that the remaining leg of the journey was so short, with just a single night's stop between them and home. Soon they would be back in Greenhaven, enjoying a well-earned moment of peace and safety.

They had done it, really done it. The second talisman was in Greencloak hands.



That night, as Conor stood watch over the others, he reveled in the wide, starry peace of the Euran pasture for what might be the last time in a long, long while.

And just for a moment, he let his guard down.

A cloaked figure loomed out of the darkness. Immediately Conor scrambled to his feet, ready to cry out for the others. As he reached for a weapon, however, a low, familiar voice, said, "Conor, it's me."

Dawson. Conor blinked at Devin's little brother. He kept his voice quiet, so that he wouldn't wake the others. "Why are you here? Are you alone?"

Dawson pushed back his hood, revealing shiny, high cheeks and bright eyes. He nodded. "I have a letter for you."

Conor marveled that the younger boy had tracked them down just to deliver a letter, but he nodded. Bashfully, he admitted, "You know I won't be able to read it."

"I'll read it," whispered Dawson, taking the weathered sheet from his cloak with a sad expression. "But just . . . I'm sorry, Conor. It's from my father." He took a deep breath.

Conor, son of Fenray,

I know that we last met under unpleasant terms, and you will not want to listen to what I have to say. However, I would like you to imagine the starving faces of your family as Dawson reads you this letter. Then you should imagine all the worse things than starvation that can befall a woman charged with betraying her lord to his enemy — even if this enemy is her own son. I have a bargain for you. Give the Iron Boar to Dawson. As soon as it is in my hands, I will forgive your family's debt and your mother will go free. They will own the land they work, and all the sheep they tend. They will be freemen, no longer my serfs. All you have to do is give Dawson the talisman. And if you do not? I will hold them to every last copper that they owe me, and I promise you, they will starve this winter, and the fate of your mother will be far crueller. Rest assured this is the last you will hear from me either way. Devin has become involved in something that Trunswick can no longer afford to support openly, lest we collapse upon ourselves. Zerif tells me that if the Conquerors may have their talisman, then I may have my family back. And so you will have yours.

The decision is yours.

With regards, The Earl of Trunswick.

Dawson folded the letter and put it back in his cloak. He at least had the grace to look horrified.

Conor's hands shook as he imagined his mother's thin face on the night they'd escaped from Trunswick. How proud she'd been of him! *Follow your heart!*

He glanced at the others. They slept soundly, trusting him to watch them on their way back to Greenhaven. They trusted him with this treasure of Rumfuss. But his family had trusted him to help keep them alive too, when they'd sent him to Trunswick to be Devin's servant. No matter how hateful he had found that position.

What was the right decision? Once the Greencloaks were victorious, surely his family would be free. But it would be too late then.

Conor was glad that Briggan was in passive form. He didn't want to see the wolf's expression as he crept to his saddlebag and removed the Iron Boar.

"I expect your father to keep his word," he whispered to Dawson. He gave the talisman to the boy.

Dawson nodded. "I'll make sure he does, Conor."

Tucking the Iron Boar into his cloak, Dawson ran into the night. The sound of his footfalls woke Meilin's horse, and Meilin sat up with a start.

"Conor, is someone there?" she asked. Her voice made the others stir as well.

When Conor, shattered with guilt, didn't answer, her eyes darted from his saddlebag, the flap hanging open, revealing the empty inside, to the place in the woods he still stared after.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What happened?"

Conor hung his head. "I'm sorry."

CONSEQUENCES

THE NIGHT WAS DARK AND FULL OF ANIMALS.

Meilin lay in her bed, eyes wide open. Her mind was full of the gardens of Zhong, her father's wise face, and the Conquerors marching over the places she'd loved.

The four kids were finally back in Greenhaven. It had been a few days since they'd returned, and Meilin's mind had been troubled for each of them. Their journey seemed to have been for nothing; Conor had handed over the precious talisman to the enemy. For his family! Hadn't she wanted to go to Zhong for her family when she'd had the chance? Hadn't he been the first to tell her to stay with them?

Far off, down the hall, someone's spirit animal made a drowsy night noise. Meilin was far away from sleep.

Since they'd returned, the fortress had been abuzz with the changes happening all over Erdas. People were taking sides. For the Greencloaks and the Fallen. For the

Conquerors and Zerif's new false heroes. Rumors were on everyone's lips: rumors of an advancing army, and of the strange promise the army had — a potion, stronger than the Nectar of Ninani, which could force the spirit animal bond for anyone who drank it: the Bile.

There was no more time for wasted missions.

"Jhi," Meilin whispered. The panda had been drowsing in the corner of the room, but when she heard her name, she lifted her chin. Her eyes were sympathetic. "Help me."

This time, when Meilin closed her eyes, searching for answers, the orbs around her were like droplets of water, brilliant, fragile, trembling. They spilled from her eyes and down her cheeks. Here were her choices: Stay. Go.

One was both wise and logical.

Stay. Fight alongside the Greencloaks: Build an army to fight this new threat.

Go. Be an army of one: Find her father before it was too late. It was neither wise nor logical. Jhi's intuition recommended against it.

But it was the choice Meilin was going to make.

She got out of bed and packed, silent and swift. The panda hesitated when Meilin held out her arm. She was offended, perhaps. After all, she'd offered her advice and Meilin wasn't taking it. Or maybe she was concerned. She'd never refused the passive state before. With a frown, Meilin focused on the request. With a whimper, Jhi vanished in a searing flash, reappearing on Meilin's skin, barely visible in the dark night.

Meilin stopped only to pick up a map from the map room and a bag of food from the kitchen.

Then she let herself out of the castle. She was going back to Zhong.

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Book Three

Blood Ties

By Garth Nix and Sean Williams

THE GREAT BAMBOO MAZE

THE BAMBOO ROSE ABOVE MEILIN, FAR ABOVE, BLOCKING OUT the sun and casting deep shadows on the intersection of two narrow paths below. Meilin stopped and glared at yet another crossroad in the Great Bamboo Maze, yet another choice of ways. She did not want to admit, not even to herself, that she had gone wrong somewhere several miles back and was now hopelessly lost.

It had seemed like such a good idea when she first thought of reaching Zhong through the Maze. The bamboo forest had been specially grown as a defense where the Wall did not run, and only selected messengers and senior officials knew the secret ways through the miles and miles of fifty-foot-high bamboo. Meilin's father, General Teng,

knew the secrets, of course, and long ago he had told Meilin how to get through from the Northern Entrance.

“Always turn left the first ten times,” whispered Meilin to herself. “Then ten turns always right, then left, right, left, left, left, left, right, right, right.”

But she had followed those instructions and had *not* found herself on the other side of the Maze. Even worse, she had counted on getting through in the single day it was supposed to take. The leather bottle of water she had filled from a stream at the entrance and two rice cakes should have been easily enough to sustain her.

Now it was the morning of the third day. Her water bottle was empty and the rice cakes were distant memories. This, coming at the end of a week’s long trek by boat and caravan across Eura, often smuggled away in dusty crates and rat-infested holds, left her feeling frustrated at her failure, as well as hungry and thirsty. Only the distant hope that her father might still be alive, and that she might somehow live long enough to find him, kept her from giving up.

Angrily, Meilin struck the stem of the nearest bamboo with her quarterstaff, the blow so powerful that it cracked the four-inch-thick bole. The bamboo fell among its fellows, but there were so many it might never have been there in the first place. There was nothing but impossibly tall bamboo all around, the narrow path, the sun high above.

For the first time, Meilin thought she might actually die in the Maze. The daughter of General Teng, to die of thirst in a

bamboo forest! It was unbearable!

An itch on her forearm diverted Meilin's thoughts. She slid up her sleeve and looked at the tattoo of a sleepy panda. She had kept her spirit animal, Jhi, in her dormant state in the Great Bamboo Maze, fearing the panda would hold her back. Now that was the least of Meilin's concerns.

"Come on, then!" ordered Meilin. "Come out and do something useful. Maybe you could *eat* a way through the bamboo for me!"

There was a flash of light and sudden movement. A furry weight pressed into her side as Jhi appeared and leaned against her, pushing her against the closest stand of bamboo, making it shake.

"Hey, watch it," protested Meilin. She felt something touch her face, and thinking it an insect, brushed it aside, only to feel more of whatever it was land on her hand. She looked up and saw delicate white flowers falling from the tips of the bamboo high above, like tiny warm snowflakes.

Bamboo flowers.

Meilin had never seen bamboo flowers before. She knew the plants only flowered once every fifty or sixty or even a hundred years, and then they died. All the bamboo plants, all at once.

"The Maze is dying," she whispered, staring up at the tops of the bamboo. Every stand of bamboo she could see was flowering. In a week or two, the bamboo would begin to dry out, crack, and fall. Before that, the floor of the forest

would be covered in flowers, attracting great hordes of rats and other animals to this once-in-a-century feast.

With the Maze gone, yet more of Zhong would be completely unprotected. The Conquerors had overrun her poor country through the Wall, and now even its lesser defenses were being torn away. Perhaps even this flowering had been caused by the Devourer somehow.

Jhi sat down heavily and reached up to drag Meilin down next to her with one big paw.

"I can't sit down!" protested Meilin. "I have to find a way out!"

She pushed the panda's paw aside and took a few steps along the left-hand path. Then she hesitated, turned, and took a few steps along the right-hand path. Jhi made a kind of snuffling noise.

"Are you laughing?" demanded Meilin. "This is very serious! I'm lost. I have no food or water. I could die here!"

Jhi patted the ground next to her. It was a very human gesture, and it reminded Meilin of her father, when he wanted her to sit next to him and receive some wisdom. What she wouldn't have given to see him now.

"I haven't got time to sit down!" she rasped. "Come on!"

It really didn't matter *what* path she took now, Meilin thought. She was totally lost. What was important now was speed. She had to get out of the Maze before she died of starvation and thirst.

She set off at a loping run, sure that this time there would be an opening in the tight ranks of bamboo, that the path

would lead to a clearing, that she would be in the open lands of Zhong.

Jhi made another noise behind her, but Meilin ignored it. Once again, her spirit animal was proving useless. If only she had Essix! The falcon could fly up and spot the way out.

"You would think a panda might be of *some* use in a bamboo forest!" muttered Meilin. She ran on another fifty yards, and came to yet another intersection of paths. She could go left, right, or straight ahead. They all looked exactly the same: long narrow tracks between great stands of bamboo.

Meilin stopped and looked back. Jhi was following her slowly but steadfastly. As the girl looked, the panda reached up and pulled down a bamboo stem, effortlessly bending it until it broke. The topmost stems came down near the path just behind the girl, showering her once again with flowers. Jhi sauntered along and began to eat, stuffing huge pawfuls of bamboo stems, leaves, and flowers into her mouth.

Meilin felt her own hunger, a pain in her middle that was difficult to ignore. Her mouth would have watered, but it was too dry. She had tried eating the bamboo on the second day, and it had caused stomach cramps that only made her feel hungrier. It was too dry, and there were no soft, new shoots that would have been easier to digest.

"There has to be a way out," she whispered. She looked wildly at the different paths. There really was no difference between them. She had gone right last time. Now she would go left, Meilin thought. Left and then right at the next

intersection, and so on. Zigzagging. That would work. She would get *somewhere* that way.

“Come on,” she said to Jhi.

This time Meilin didn’t run. She just didn’t have the energy anymore. But she walked fast, ignoring her hunger pains and rasping throat, the heat and the humidity.

“I *will* find a way out,” she whispered. “I *will* get to Zhong. I *will* fight the Devourer and our enemies.”

But against that, there was a small voice in her head that whispered a hopeless, constantly repeating thought.

I’m going to die. I’m lost and I’m going to die.

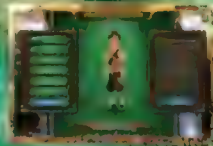


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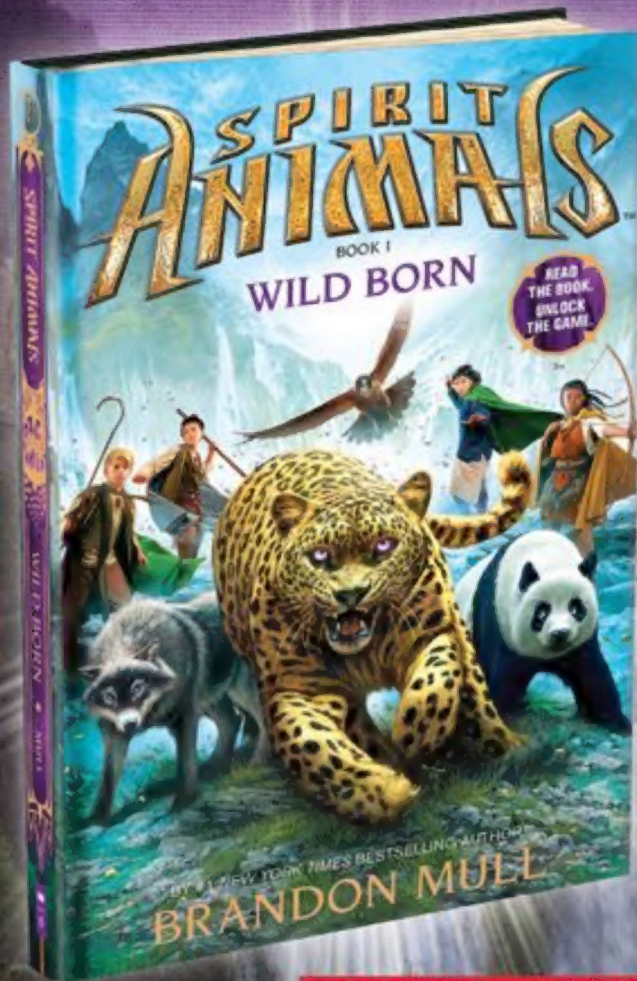
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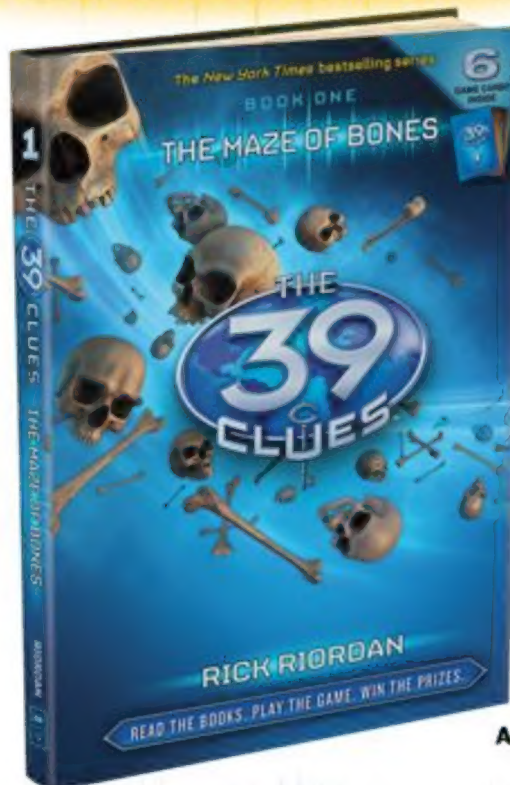


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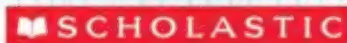


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